THE CHAMPION

CHARLES EGBERT CRADDOCK

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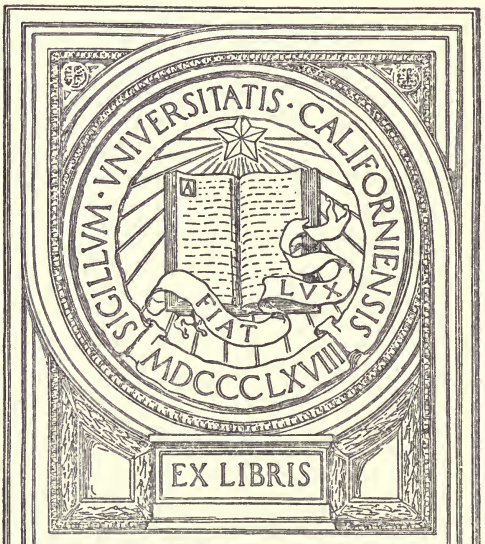

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HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY,
BOSTON AND NEW YORK.

"I CAN'T HIDE IT! I BURNT THE COPY"

THE CHAMPION

BY

CHARLES EGBERT CRADDOCK

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
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THE CHAMPION

CHAPTER I

The devil was looking out of the window. Yet the traffic in the streets was unchecked. The cable-cars whizzed past with a clanging clamor. Great rumbling vans laden with freight alternated with carriages rolling noiselessly on rubber-tired wheels. The sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians. Men and boys, ladies and little children, boldly came and went over the neighboring crossing, although they could plainly see the devil's head poking out of a high window in the newspaper building and hear the shrill tones of the devil's voice as he discoursed to his friend within.

For in fact this was not the old Enemy of Mankind, but a small imp — commonly known as a printer's devil — who by virtue of

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a beguiling chirp of "Copy!" served as a means of communication between the foreman of the composing-room and the editorial staff.

"That 's wher' they set her up!" he said, pointing to the composing-room in an explanatory way, and with a paw copiously smeared with ink.

There were streaks of this commodity on his face also, although his functions had no concern with it. Still the devil is not the only fiend who dabbles in printer's ink without a call.

His friend, Peter Bateman, a heavy, thick-set boy, with a broad, sullen, flushed face and a lowering eye, cast a glance at the cases visible through the open door from the hall.

"Wher' do the boss do the writin' at?" he asked, in a hoarse, wheezy voice.

The devil tossed his red head. "Boss don't hev ter write none!" he retorted arrogantly. "*Foreman* is what *we* call him — bes' printer in these 'ere Newnited States!"

"But wher' do the feller stay what hes ter write?" persisted Pete.

"Oh, — *him?*" responded the devil, disparagingly. "They puts him in a little 'rinktum,' they call it, all by himself. *He* ain't much force! He can't write a word if folks git ter gabblin' ter him. Why, sometimes when I jes' say 'Copee' ter him, he looks like he will go out of his mind! They hev ter hire a whole passel o' other fellers ter help him *jes' do the writin'*. They hev got a double row of desks for a lot of 'em in that long room. They are all orful slow. Sometimes I be kep' yappin' 'Copee' at 'em all day so I can't stay abed o' night — ef I eats toler'ble hearty, — but jes' keeps jumpin' out an' yappin' 'Copee' in my sleep, till my mother gits afeard I'll fetch the perlice with my noise."

He grinned at the recollection of these somnolent vagaries. Then in his self-assumed duties as cicerone to his friend, showing the plant of the daily newspaper, as the rooms were nearly deserted at this hour, he duly exhibited the type-setting machine, a comparatively new acquisition in this southwestern city, and not altogether popular in the

composing-room, where much of the work was still done by hand.

"It *is* a go, of course," said the devil discriminatingly, reflecting the sentiment of his elders, "but I tell you now, this machine ain't in it for speed an' percision with a reg'lar old-fashioned, gilt-edged, greased-lightning compositor like Bob Platt, — that 's our foreman, ye know! That 's the kind o' printer I 'm goin' ter be, — ye kin bet yer hat!"

He hesitated and seemed a trifle out of countenance for a moment after he had said this. For when he had first been employed in the office, a raw little country lad, his admiration of the printer's craft had been so great, his ambition so exuberant, his ingenuous emulation so open that he had immediately announced his determination to be some day a champion compositor and stand preëminent at the case! The galley-boys and junior printers, of the variety called "cubs," would have been more or less than human had they failed to improve so promising an opportunity for fun. They guyed him unmercifully, and

they called him "the Champion" so relentlessly that there was no one employed about the paper, from the engine-room to the "rinktum" (sanctum) of the editor-in-chief, who was unaware of the application of this proud designation. The little devil, Edward Macdonald by name, winced and wilted under the ridicule of his fellows, but it had no deterrent effect upon his determination and the great object of his ambition. He accounted it the chief feat of manual dexterity; and he thought the greatest sight the city could afford was the spectacle of Bob Platt swiftly distributing type, while the bits of metal rattled like a furious hail into their appropriate boxes. Even now he was volubly pitying Peter Bateman that he had never beheld this phenomenon, and possibly was fated never to witness it.

Then, with the enthusiasm of a predestined compositor, he declared, "I'd ruther stand at the case when I gits my growth than be the bigges' editor goin'!"

They presently sauntered out again into

the dusky hall, dimly illumined by a flickering gas-jet here and there, for twilight was at hand, and leaned once more against the sill of the window.

"Them reporters hev the bes' time o' any o' the staff. Them men skeet around town till they are wore ter nothin' but eyes and lead pencil! They see everything! — always on the go! An' hev compliments o' the season all hours, — an' free passes ter the theaytre, lemme tell ye!"

An impressive silence ensued. Then a shadow crossed Ned's ink-streaked face, which was the paler because of the fading of his freckles, natural concomitant of his red hair, by reason of his indoor work.

"Now look at me!" the devil resumed in a tone calculated to invite contrast. "I hev ter stay cooped up 'ere half the day an' nigh all night, an' I work an' work, an' I pays all my wages over ter my mother; I never keep a cent for myself. I ain't grudgin' her nor my little sister neither — but ain't I goin' ter see inside a theaytre never no more?"

He thrust his hands into his empty pockets. His heart was swelling. He breathed hard. Suddenly Pete, his thin lips askew, his eyes narrowed to the merest slits, till it seemed surprising that so much slyness could look out thence, nodded his head again and again, till the motion seemed automatic, as if he were a queer bit of bobbing machinery.

"What d' ye mean by that?" cried Edward, observing him dubiously, mystified and in some sort offended by this enigmatic dumb show.

Pete's bullet head became stationary; pride and munificence were alike expressed in his features.

"*I* kin give ye a free pass ter the theaytre," he declared with magnified importance. "I 'm the boss, — an' don't ye forget it."

"Wha' — wha' — wha' say?" stuttered Ned excitedly.

Pete glanced apprehensively over his shoulder in the closing twilight. "D' ye know Gorham's theaytre?" he asked.

Edward nodded.

"It 's got a window, — a back window, — what ain't more 'n eight feet off 'n the ground." Pete made this announcement in a mysterious gurgling whisper.

Edward stared.

"Ef ye 'll boost me, I 'll lean out an' reach down an' give ye a lift," Pete explained.

The devil stood aghast at this bold scheme.

"S'pose the play-actors war ter nab us?" he suggested in an appalled staccato.

Pete snapped scornful fingers in the air. "Then we 'll be put out o' the door, an' that 's the way the tony folks goes out what ain't obleeged to come in at the window."

Ned laughed in sympathy. The novelty of the adventure tempted him. Opportunity favored him. There was always a lull in the pressure of his duties at this hour. Much of the "copee" was already in type, and until the later dispatches should begin to come in the work of the office would not show that increasing momentum which was wont to culminate in the final rush of going to press. He knew that he could be back before he would

be needed, and still see a good bit of the play. This certainty reënforced the longing for the lights and the crowd and the splendor of the scenic display. But something — an ill-defined something — held him back. He remembered afterward that, though so subtle a sensation, it was for the moment as strong as if a material hand had clutched him. It was not his habit of honesty, for just then he did not realize that this was stealing, — that in surreptitiously seeing the play he absolutely robbed the management of the price of his appropriate seat among the gallery gods. Perhaps it was the instinct of filial obedience.

"My mother can't abide for me ter go to the theaytre nohow," he reflected. "But some folks say that it is eddication for a boy. But my mother, she say from all she hears it 's apter ter eddicate him ter be a hoodlum than anything else, — an' if a boy wants real eddication the Public School is yawnin' fur him."

He remembered this as he ran down the stairs beside Pete. He hesitated even at the street door.

"Come on — we 're in for a orful bully time!" wheezed Pete. "Few folks kin go ter the theaytre this-a-way!"

Ned put his doubts behind him and started up the avenue. "Shucks!" he argued within himself, "a boy to suit my mother's notions could n't ever have no fun an' see the sights and know what 's goin' on. An' she hain't never had no schoolin' sca'cely, and has lived way back in the country mighty nigh all her life. She never was in a theaytre in her born days."

Night had come at last, but its black mantle, which elsewhere enveloped the world, was here torn into dun-colored fringes and spangled about with gas-jets and electric lights. Up and down the façades of distant buildings the illuminated windows shone like swarms of golden bees. The incandescent street lamps stretched in glittering files on either side of the ascending avenue, converging and converging till they seemed to meet in a rising planet in the limits of the far east. Above their brilliant ranks now and again swayed a

central arc-light, displaying a splendid focus of intense white lustre, and flinging the luminous rays of its encircling aureola far into the surrounding darkness. Below were dimmer lights of yellow or blue which marked the progress of the cable cars. They crashed and banged as they passed. The imperative strokes of the gong sounded now and again to clear the way. The shriller bells jangled sharply. The passengers stood in the aisles packed like sardines, or clung to the platforms of the already crowded open grip-car.

"They are all goin' ter Gorham's," crowed Pete, rejoicing in the prospective crowds as if he had a share in the receipts.

Ned began to think it a fine thing too. He had all the afflatus of public amusement. To be one of a great joyful crowd seemed to him to multiply the pleasure by the multitude. His step grew light. He heard the light steps behind him. Everybody was going, and he was going too.

The theatre was well filled before they came in sight of the massive building. In front of

it on the sidewalk was a gilded standard supporting a pyramid of gas-jets. A circle of boys sat beneath this with fans to sell, for the May weather was growing warm and the palm-leaf industry was looking up. The boys had besieged the crowd as it was entering the theatre, and now they waited to waylay the belated pleasure-seeker. At a distance the pyramid, with the circle of fluttering palm leaves beneath it, looked like some strange, gigantic, many-petaled flower.

Pete stopped short at the sight.

"Bust them fellers! We must n't let on ter them."

"*Naw*, sir! Naw, *sir!*" exclaimed Ned, with emphasis.

Both turned at once from the broad avenue, scuttled hastily down a side street, then plunged into the mysterious darkness of an alley. In a moment they were under the back window of the theatre.

A mellow dim light from within showed that the sash was lifted. The tremulous wail of a violin drifted out to them. The orches-

tra had begun to tune their instruments. There was no time to lose. Ned turned hurriedly to Pete.

"Up with ye, — I 'll boost."

To his surprise Pete drew back. His face was concealed by the darkness, and his hoarse voice was sunk to a husky mutter.

"Hey? wha' say?" demanded Ned.

Pete grew more intelligible.

"I hain't never been in there," he remonstrated, as if the adventure were altogether Ned's scheme. "I dunno wher' I might come out at. I might jump right inter a — a — hornet's nest."

"I say!" exclaimed Ned sarcastically. "But if you are weakening I 'll go fust."

"Well, — I wuz thinkin' as much," muttered Pete.

Ned needed no boosting. The foundation of the building was of rough stone, and offered some hold for his fingers and feet. He was a light weight, even for his tender years, and as wiry and active as a cat. Up and up he went till his grimy, ink-streaked paws clutched the

outer moulding of the window frame, — a scientific jerk, and his hands and knees were on the sill.

He paused to listen. He heard only the orchestra. The music was now in full swing. He peeped cautiously within, then drew back his head with a suddenness which almost precipitated him from the window.

"Is ennybody there?" gasped Pete, ready to run.

"Dunno!" panted Ned.

He peeped cautiously within once more. He was becoming accustomed to the dim light, and this time he saw distinctly close to the window a great gilded dragon, that had added to its ancient glories the triumph of frightening the devil almost out of his wits.

At this second glance Ned understood the nature of the object. He eyed it with less fear and increasing curiosity. He had seen nothing like this monster at the Zoo, which furnished all his knowledge of Natural History, and with antique myths his acquaintance was slight.

"Well, — I should smile!" he ejaculated, gravely staring.

The dragon was perennially smiling, with a wide pasteboard mouth, and some big pasteboard teeth.

Ned was in a strange world, — a great world of shams, where the trees were clots of green paint on immense canvas sheets stretched on tottering wooden frames, where hospitable castles had no substance, where mountain crags were trestles of various heights supporting spring mattresses, covered with dusty imitations of mosses and vines, on which desperate leaps might safely be made. There were ropes and pulleys, and windlasses, and drop-scenes, and swaying borders in the "flies" overhead in place of a firmament. There were squares here and there on the floor, which he knew were trapdoors, whence he had seen gnomes and elves spring up, when once there had been given a Christmas performance with free admission to working children.

Deep shadows gloomed on every hand,

seeming the deeper because of the flood of light which irradiated the unseen region beyond the great "flats." No human creature was visible. Only one sound could now be heard, — a clear, resonant, tutored voice, reciting stately lines. Somehow the tones awed him.

He became aware in another moment that Pete was vaguely scuffling about the foundation of the building; he leaned far out of the window and stretched down both his arms.

"Hurry up, Pete," he adjured his friend; "they 're just a-goin' it on the stage!"

Looking down, he thought the height of the window was considerably more than eight feet from the ground. Pete had a grievously foreshortened aspect. In fact he seemed little more than an old cap, bobbing about vivaciously on the paving-stones. These gyrations were in vain. Except during a spasmodic endeavor to walk up the wall like a fly which Pete called "climbing," he did not leave the earth at all, for he had not the fly's peculiar and special facilities. He was too clumsy to climb, too inactive, much too fat.

When he slid down for the last time, panting, bruised, exhausted, and almost ready to cry, Ned sought to encourage him to further exertions.

"Naw, sir!" replied Pete angrily. "I ain't goin' ter try it nare 'nother time, — break my neck along of your fool tricks the fust thing I know. Come down out of that window! I ain't a-goin' ter let ye see the play-actors if I can't. Come down!"

The printer's devil stared as he sat in the window.

"Ye mus' be sick!" he exclaimed eloquently. "I got in 'ere myself, an' 'ere I 'm goin' ter stay."

"Naw, ye ain't! — naw, ye ain't!" The old soft cap nodded with malicious significance.

"Who is able ter take me out? — ye ain't, fur sure!" the devil retorted from his lofty perch.

The shapeless old cap emitted but one word. "Perlice."

Ned was silent for a moment. The old cap

bobbed about very merrily, for Pete executed a double shuffle of derision and triumph.

"Perlice hes got nothin' ter do with me," Ned declared stoutly. "The theaytre folks would jes' put me outer doors, — an' they hes got ter ketch me fust." He wagged his red head as much as to say that this should be a tough job.

Pete still danced.

"Perlice will take ye ter the lock-up for beatin' fifty cents outer the theaytre folks."

The devil snapped his fingers.

The dance paused for the more serious business of argument. "An' for breakin' in the back window, an' mebbe stealin' di'monds an' fine fixin's outer the star's dressin'-room. I 'm goin' ter the station right now with that tale," added the shameless Pete. "Come down out o' that there window or go ter jail, — you bet!"

He looked up anxiously. How he grudged the pleasure that he could not share!

Ned, although startled, surprised, and angry, perceived the net that circumstance was

beginning to weave about him. But he would not listen to the counsels of prudence, — for when had he ever taken a dare? Besides, he hardly believed that Pete meant to make good his threat.

"They 'll need something more than yer word, ye lyin' hoodlum!" he said, shaking his fist at the shabby old cap below. "Ef the perlice kin find a cobweb o' proof that I stole actor's di'monds I 'll go ter jail without wunking a wink."

With this boast he sprang down and disappeared amidst the glooms within.

The clouds were parting before the rising moon. Its golden rays fell upon the empty window. The dragon looked out and grinned. Pete stood in baffled anger and astonishment listening to his friend's stealthy steps till the sound died away in the distance. Then settling his cap more firmly on his head, he ran swiftly down the alley, up the side street, and out upon the broad avenue.

CHAPTER II

MEANTIME Ned was timorously skulking about in that strange, unkempt, haggard world known as "behind the scenes." He realized that it was to him a foreign world, and he bore himself with the alert suspiciousness of an alien. He kept an anxious lookout for the red jackets of the scene-shifters, and whenever he saw them bespangling the gray shadows of those dreary canvas vistas he dodged dexterously behind other "flats" and into deeper glooms.

"I 've got to keep my eye peeled or some o' them fellers will ketch me sure!" he said to himself.

Once down one of these aisles a sudden veritable scene showed at the end of the perspective, through a wide door opening upon a room tinted in green, the color being very keen amidst the dun shadows without and the

brilliant artificial illumination within. There, seemingly lounging or waiting, were groups of men and women, richly and quaintly attired, but with a prosaic every-day pose and gesture and expression of countenance, the effect curiously at variance with the suggestions of the antique garb they wore. This incongruity was not perceptible in a figure that he descried suddenly approaching, clad in a gown of soft shimmering white silk as in everlasting youth and beauty, — so radiant, so poetic, so unreal an apparition to the boy that Ned, stopping to stare, lost all sense of his identity. She, who was to be Ophelia, catching a glimpse of his pale, wistful, astonished little face in the glooms, with its big dark eyes and curling red hair, as he stood as if rooted to the spot, cast a half-amused smile on him as she passed. Her maid was following at a distance with a shawl, and Ned, suddenly realizing his peril, hastily darted behind one of the tombstones which even now were placed in readiness, awaiting the graveyard scene, and then once more dodged from flat to flat and from trestle to trestle.

He hardly knew in what direction he was tending, till all at once a flood of light broke upon him and he stood in the wings. The broad spread of the stage lay before him, — gorgeous with the presence of royalty and soldiery, of lords and ladies, of jesters and pages, — the "counterfeit presentment" of the palaces of eld, and of the splendid past. It was rounded by the dazzling crescent of the foot-lights that clasped this charmed sphere as the new moon clasps the old. There was a ceaseless shimmer above them, and through it he could see heads, heads, heads. The house was crowded from parquet to gallery. Now and then the audience broke into enthusiastic applause.

As Ned stood staring it did not occur to him that he was in the direct way of any actor going on or coming off the stage, until a sudden step sounded close at hand behind the wing. It was only an accident that he did not electrify audience and players by rushing out upon the stage, for the powers behind the scenes had far more terrors for

him than public opinion. As he shrank back toward the wall, looking eagerly about him for a refuge, he stumbled against the oddly fashioned chair in which Hamlet had sat during the second scene of the first act, and which now by accident or design had been thrust aside here. The devil sprang upon the rich crimson velvet cushions, and the Prince of Denmark was none the wiser.

No one else was the wiser. The high arms of the chair shielded Ned from observation as the step drew near and passed, — others still came and went in quick succession. He had a full view of the stage. He was in no danger of discovery unless a special search should be made for him. He had the choicest opportunity for enjoyment — but somehow the zest was gone. His conscience had roused itself and laid hold upon him. Instead of following the incidents of the play enacted before him he was vainly striving to justify himself to that implacable inward monitor. This was not stealing, he stoutly asseverated. It was only a lark, — and all for fun! But con-

science — even a small boy's conscience — is the most potent of all moral forces, and he suffered a poignant pang for every mill of the half dollar which was the price of his appropriate seat among the gallery gods.

When at last he resolutely tore his mind from this subject he could not apply it to the pleasure of the moment. He began to wonder if Pete would really make good his threat, — if Pete would dare to charge him with stealing from the dressing-rooms, and burglary and what not.

"There would have to be something stole fust, an' then they would have ter trace it ter me," he said to reassure himself, for he was a sharp boy, and amply conversant with this world's ways.

Despite his reasoning, however, he glanced over his shoulder ever and anon, expecting to see a big man in a blue uniform with a police officer's badge on his breast.

When a tall man in dark garments appeared suddenly close at hand he thought for a moment that his worst forebodings were realized.

At a second glance he saw that this man was clad in black, not blue, and wore a high silk hat set far back on his light brown hair. He had a light brown beard, a florid face, and eager, excited blue eyes. He continually twirled his eye-glasses in his hand with a gesture so nervous that it made the devil nervous too, and when compelled to desist from this occupation by the necessity of placing the glasses upon the bridge of his sharp hooked nose, he utilized the interval by thrusting his hands into his pockets, where, judging by the sound, he restlessly rattled his silver change or bunch of keys. An alert, impulsive man, eager, unreasonable, and irritable, Ned thought him, and afterward the devil had cause to strengthen this opinion. The boy was near enough to hear his words, although spoken in a low tone, for he stood far back and well out of sight of the audience.

"Well — insurance now — the premium comes pretty heavy," the manager was saying, for this was Mr. Gorham, the manager and owner of the theatre.

"Has to be kept up, though, — no use kicking," replied a wiry, extremely thin, pallid, and wrinkled elderly gentleman who had joined the other. Ned guessed that this was an intimate personal friend of the manager, since their talk was of his private affairs.

And because of this fact it seemed very odd to the boy that a certain subordinate player awaiting his cue in the wings should evidently be eager to hear.

"Eavesdropper!" thought Ned, indignantly.

It seemed less heinous that he himself should overhear this conversation, since it was accidental on his part, and, at this time at least, he thought it meant nothing to him.

Ned eyed the actor narrowly, and did not like the man's looks. His attitude was very singular. He was almost behind one of the wings, and quite out of sight of the two friends. His face was very red, even beneath the rouge. He looked coarse and awkward in his gaudy costume, and leaned so heavily against the great frame of the scene that it

tottered with his weight. He had a piece of ice in a towel which he continually applied to the back of his neck and the top of his head. He did this with the dexterity of an expert, but almost mechanically, for his eyes were fixed first on one speaker's face, then on the other's.

"Of course the insurance wants to be kept up," said the manager, frantically jingling the coin in his pocket. "Though," he added with an afterthought, "I don't see why — I've insured this building and the properties for fifteen years, and never had a loss by fire." He stroked his beard reflectively. "Wish I had now all the premiums I've paid in my time," he said almost piteously.

"When did the policy in the Rising Phœnix expire?" demanded his friend.

"To-day at noon. I refused to renew. I'm done with that agent, at all events!" His eyes flashed, and he twirled his eye-glasses with a fierce gesture. "Whatever I do, I'll have no more dealings with *him*."

Mr. Gorham's expression changed suddenly

to one of bland politeness as he bowed agreeably to a lady, who had been very dignified and stiffly splendid on the stage as the queen, and withal robustly youthful, but coming off she looked old and tired. She was so heavily whited and rouged that her facial expression was wholly lost, and her eyes seemed to be the only natural feature of her face, and to look out with a sort of forlorn reality above the simpering sham of her wreck of a countenance.

The elderly skeleton-like friend of the manager shook his bones together, so to speak, and then stepped forward with alacrity and offered his hand to the lady, greeting her as an old acquaintance. Somehow Ned resented his assured courtly manner, which might have graced a man of finer appearance and fresher youth. It seemed an assumption on his part. "Maybe he thinks very well of his bones," Ned speculated. "Does he suppose he is pretty?" Ugly though he was, the lady did not scorn him, but kindly told him about a new granddaughter she had, and showed him

a telegram. She smiled, and nodded most benignly in receiving his polite congratulations, and then sailed on toward the green-room.

The subordinate actor at the wing suddenly dropped the towel and the lump of ice. He had caught his cue, and with a stiff, ungainly gait he strode upon the stage. The star had returned also, and with his reappearance the plaudits broke forth.

"There he is again!" exclaimed the manager enthusiastically. "He is playing in fine form to-night, — every inch the Prince of Denmark!"

Ned, too, was looking at the stage from his nook in the great man's chair behind the wing. The by-play behind the scenes had absorbed him hitherto, but he grew intensely interested when the star spoke to the actor who had lurked and listened in the wings. Hamlet seemed to be instructing him how to play a part, and in honest fact the subordinate had shown in a scene in the previous act that he stood in grievous need of such tuition.

"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pro-

nounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul, to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who, for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise; I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it outherods Herod. Pray you, avoid it."

All at once was presented a strange, unexpected attraction, not set down in the bills. The four or five players to whom this is addressed are wont to receive it with bows of acquiescence, intelligent glances at each other and at their instructor to express comprehension, concurrence of opinion, and willingness. The actor who had lurked and listened had

the rôle of the "first player," and was the spokesman of the party. He led these demonstrations with sufficient discretion, but when his cue was given he responded with a hoarse drunken thickness ornamented with an unmistakable hiccup.

"I 'se warrant yer (hic) honor!"

His potations before he made his first appearance this evening had not been so deep as to intoxicate him, but he had since reinforced them heavily. He had sought to sober himself by a cold application to the head and neck before again "going on;" the heated air, however, and the excitement were fast doing away with its good effects.

Hamlet, striving to maintain his composure and self-possession in the presence of the audience, addressed the second long exhortation chiefly to the others. He could not have devised a worse expedient. The "first player," eager to assert his precedence among his fellows, and to impress the star with the conviction that he was perfectly sober and reliable, gave such prominence to his acquiescent dumb

show that it became extravagant and uncouth, and before the lines of the admonition were concluded he was bowing about the stage like a clown.

There was a vague, suppressed titter in the parquet. A sharp, sibilant hiss swept down from the gallery. The other mock players, forgetting their appropriate pantomime, stood as still as if stricken into stone. The equilibrium of the great star was fairly shaken. There was a quiver singularly like stage fright in those clear melodious tones, but he gallantly persisted to the end, and gave the "first player" his cue.

"Reformed!" exclaimed the "first player" automatically, — he had forgotten every word of his lines but this. "We 've reformed," he reiterated, "an' — an' — we ain't never goin' ter do it no more," he declared, leering facetiously at the audience.

"Come off! Come off!" insisted the frenzied stage manager, in a sepulchral undertone from behind the scenes.

But the sodden idiot advanced to the foot-

lights beyond the reach of the sheltering curtain which would fain have gathered him in.

The star bowed with dignity and retired, and the "first player" began his explanation to the audience amidst a storm of hisses.

"Gen'elmen an' lad'es, — I mean *lad'es* an' gen'elmen," the gallant soul corrected himself, — "want ter make a little speege, — I forgot lines — (hic) prompter throws me the word, — but (hic) he 's got no teeth, for I can't make him out, — go look at book, — boss is a-callin' me now, — make it all right, — (hic) — be back d'rec'ly."

The bell jangled eloquently for the curtain to fall.

"Let it down on him, — don't care if it kills him!" was heard in the frantic managerial tones from the wings.

The characteristically good-natured American audience burst into roars of laughter, and the curtain came down amidst a storm of sarcastic applause before, and not upon, the gravely bowing "first player."

The great star was with some difficulty

beguiled into going on with the play. The uproarious audience was quieted — nay, melted — by the sight of the managerial distress and the terms of the heart-broken apology which was offered. The curtain was rung up; the performance recommenced at the entrance of Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern; and these preliminaries arranged, the stage manager, the manager of the theatre, his friend of the skeleton-like contour, the leader of the orchestra, a number of the minor members of the company, and a strong detachment of self-constituted "bosses" went in a different spirit to reckon with the author of all this woe.

Why nobody "nabbed" Ned was always a mystery to him afterward. Forgetting himself at the crisis he sprang boldly out of his chair and participated in the varied excitements ensuing behind the scenes as freely as if he owned the theatre. Perhaps he might not have been so eager to hear and see had he divined the influence that this incident would exert on his immediate future. He followed

the "management" and the crowd of "supes," scene-shifters, call-boys, and "dead-heads" to the door of the dressing-room where the unlucky "first player" was to be called to account.

This personage had divested himself of his stage toggery and stood there in his every-day clothes, a coarse, slouching, red-faced man in a brownish suit and a checked shirt. Within the room another actor was hastily arraying himself in the gaudy attire which the "first player" had been accustomed to wear as the "Player King." The substitute was almost pathetic in his anxiety as he dressed himself, nervously repeating aloud the "lines" and giving not an instant's notice to the crowd of bystanders about the open door nor to the interview between the management and the "first player."

This was sufficiently stormy. The unfortunate "first player" got his walking-papers in no measured terms. Mr. Gorham took occasion to interject some very severe remarks, although the affair was really none of his

business, the grievance lying between the manager of the company and the actor.

"It 's none of *your* funeral, anyhow," cried the goaded "first player" indignantly.

He snapped his fingers in Gorham's face, giving the high silk hat, which was always precariously perched on its owner's head, a fillip that sent it rolling on the floor among the crowd.

Gorham's arrogant and peremptory manners made him a very unpopular man. Nevertheless it might have been an accident — although it looked singularly like design — that the hat was in a moment trampled into a shapeless wreck by twoscore sturdy feet.

Even when under no provocation, he showed in every gesture how vehement and impulsive was his nature. Now, insulted in his own theatre, he shook off the slight restraints which he acknowledged. It suited his humor to consider the "first player's" demonstration as a blow. He looked positively tigerish as he sprung upon the actor. The energy of his wrath gave much "power to his elbow;" the

blows that fell from his clenched fist had a wonderfully resonant compact sound, — it made Ned wince to think that a man's head and face received them. The "first player" could do little to defend himself. The crowd, that always turns to the successful side, lifted not a finger to aid or protect him.

And high above all the tumult the "Player King," putting on now his robes of state, and now his tinsel crown, daubing his grave anxious face with red and white, repeated his "lines" heedless of the commotion.

In less time than it can be told, the actor, fearfully beaten, was partly dragged and partly kicked to the back window, and there was thrust bodily forth. A heavy thud outside told of a heavy fall.

Manager Gorham turned from the window, wiping the blood from his hands upon his handkerchief, and looking about in sarcastic triumph at the crowd that had trampled upon his hat. Ned was astonished to observe that these men seemed to have forgotten their share in that little transaction, for several who

had been most demonstrative in that expression of contempt spoke to Gorham now with earnest respectfulness, and in grave reprehension of the poor wretch whose sore bones lay out on the flagging in the alley. The manager gave a short, fierce, snort-like response, and as he turned abruptly he almost ran over Ned.

"Get out of my way, boy, or I'll kill you!" he exclaimed irritably.

Ned, roused to a realization of the situation, shrank back among the huge flats. It was only the general excitement which prevented his discovery. Gorham must have thought him one of the call-boys. Ned stole swiftly away from shadow to shadow, from flat to flat, till he reached his old retreat. He sprang into the chair and sat there panting, feeling much like a mouse regaining its hole after a perilous but successful tour of the pantry.

The stage was again before him, all glitter and splendor. The play of Hamlet — that subtlest delineation of the subtlest character ever conceived by the mind of man — was

once more in its triumphal progress. The audience hung breathless on every word. Ned cared now for none of it. He was discouraged, — cast down. He was still young and ingenuous enough to be grieved by those contemptible phases of human nature exhibited in the manager, when he so brutally proved himself the master in his own house, in the truckling spirit of the crowd, in the degradation and coarse vice of the actor, the forlorn "first player." As to himself — he too was much to blame. He was pierced with a full realization of the wickedness of his presence here.

"My mother would call it *stealin'*, an' nothin' shorter," he said, remembering her homely, direct phrase.

Then he had a vivid mental picture of her. He knew that again and again she was going down the long steep flights of stairs to the street door to peer into the dark thoroughfare, wondering at his continued absence, and trembling to think of the many temptations that lead a boy to crime in a great city.

Whatever may be the beneficial educational effects of seeing the play of Hamlet from the gallery, they are certainly lacking in a view stolen from the wings, with fifty cents heavy on the conscience, nothing at all on the stomach, a great and growing dread of discovery, and a morbid presentiment that something terrible is about to happen.

Was it not far better, Ned thought, to be at home, singing with his mother their simple songs about the Good Shepherd, according to their wont in those evenings when he was at leisure from the office? The kettle used to join in with a will and make the duet a trio; the fire would roar it into a chorus; the monkey-stove would get red hot with sheer good will; his mother's face, usually so pale, would glow like a rosy girl's; the two-year-old sister would babble her admiration of the kerosene lamp. And he would feel that, being the only son of his mother and she a widow, he occupied a highly responsible and dignified position, and that it behooved him to be frugal and steady and sensible, and hard-working like a man, for

his father, a Scotch emigrant, in dying had left his family quite alone in this western country. Thus Ned would infuse his importance into his quavering alto as he sang, until it seemed, to him and his mother at least, as sonorous and as grand as the biggest double bass. Ah, — surely, surely better these gentle innocent joys than any stolen pleasures.

He began to think of trying to escape by the window at which he had entered. Then a frantic terror seized him. Was the man still lying there where he had been thrown? Ned had heard the heavy thud on the flagging of the alley, — had any one heard the man walk away? He had been severely beaten, and that, too, while intoxicated. He had been hurled out of the window, — a serious fall! Had he risen? — would he ever rise again?

Ned began to shiver. He concluded to await the close of the performance and follow the employees out of the side door, — there must surely be some such exit if only he knew where to find it.

He could not have explained why he was afraid to seek to escape by the window, but he said to himself that if the man had been killed by the fall he would not be the first to discover it. His own wrong-doing here to-night had made him sensitive to suspicion, for wrong-doing always fosters cowardice. A brave heart implies a clear conscience.

He strove to pacify his impatience as he waited.

"I was mighty sharp-set to come!" he said sarcastically.

Once or twice he gave a sudden start and sat upright on the crimson cushions of the great luxurious chair.

Once or twice shadows wavered across the brilliantly lighted stage, — he rubbed his eyes. The words he heard meant nothing; the figures he saw became grotesque, mingled, ill-defined. They were suddenly gone, — an interval, — an utter blank —

All was dark about him. He thought he was in bed at home. He strove to turn over,

— his bed was too short, — too narrow. In amazement he began to feel about him, — there were soft velvet cushions beneath him, — heavy wood carving on either side. His heart sprang into his mouth. He had fallen asleep in Hamlet's chair. Actors and audience were gone, — he wondered that the stir of the crowd had failed to wake him. The theatre was dark and deserted, the doors were locked, and beneath the walls lay perhaps the body of a dead man.

He started up trembling at the thought. The moon's pallid light fell through one of the lofty windows above the gallery and quivered in ghostly fashion upon the stage where erstwhile the filial Dane had hearkened to the hollow voice of the spectre of a murdered sire. The white glimmer gave wan and wavering glimpses of the scenery of this strange mimic world. Mountains loomed up in the clare-obscure. A painted galleon on a painted ocean was bravely sailing away, bound for nowhere.

Suddenly — was that a moving shadow among the motionless shadows? Ned stared

hard at it. There was no mistake. The moonlight showed an indistinct figure advancing stealthily down the stage.

Far, far away a great clock struck one. The single tone, as it invaded the silence, had a weird abruptness. It sent a chill through Ned's heart. A superstitious terror had laid hold upon him. With starting eyes fixed upon the apparition, he shrank softly back into his hiding place.

CHAPTER III

THE apparition advanced a few paces down the centre of the stage. As it stood there in the fainting shimmer of the moonbeams, its head stretched forth as if it scented the dawn, Ned could hear nothing but the tumultuous beating of his own heart.

The figure paused thus only for a moment. Then it leaped into the air and cut a wiry caper.

To people more conversant with the traditional manners and customs of ghosts this might seem so gross a departure from spectral etiquette as to induce doubt of the genuineness of the manifestation. But to the boy the grotesque gesture seemed horribly uncanny. He sprang from his seat — his limbs failed him and he sank back; he sought to scream — not a sound came from his dry and parched lips.

"Ye 're too drunk yit fur this biz, pard." A hoarse, half-suppressed voice issued from the wings.

A short, thickset, bow-legged man was emerging thence, and the figure on the stage turned to meet him.

"Pshaw!" said the tall apparition contemptuously. "I 'm as sober as the bishop."

And what was this? A familiar voice; and now that Ned looked again, a familiar figure. No ghost, — only the sorry "first player," whom Ned had imagined as lying dead outside on the flagging of the alley.

"I mus' be gittin' weak in the upper story!" the boy said to himself.

He was so rejoiced to be freed from his superstitious terrors, so glad, too, to see the "first player" in full life and to know that no tragedy had that night been enacted under this roof save the tragedy of Hamlet, that he laughed slyly as he rested his chin on the high arm of the chair, and with merry eyes watched the men. He hardly cared to speculate upon the strange fact of their presence

here at this hour. He was only waiting for them to be gone that he might make his escape at last.

"I don't want no mo' o' these crazy shines, though, ef ye do be so mighty sober," said the short man sulkily. "Somebody out there — the night watchman, mebbe — will hear ye trampling in 'ere, an' then wher' will we be?"

"A-scootin' up the alley," with a free gesture of his right arm. The "first player" was difficult to repress.

The surly, thickset man — Ned could not see his face, but his slouch, his voice, his manner were full of malignant intimations — evidently thought best to change his tone with his tipsy companion. He put down a five-gallon galvanized iron can that he had been carrying, and stared with an admirable imitation of surprise at the "first player."

"Why, — look-a-here, if ye jes' wanter have a little aggervation with the perlice an' skeer Gorham by lettin' him know that we hev broke into his theatre, *I'm* with ye every time! He warn't mean enough, nohow, for

the way that ye have laid off ter pay him back! He never done nothin' but kick ye like ye were a cur, an' beat ye half blind, an' fling ye out o' the window! 'T would have been assault with intent ter kill if a pore man had done all that, but rich Gorham, — pshaw! that 's nothin'. Jes' let 's stir up a little fuss an' fetch the perlice, — ter skeer *him!* Ho! Ho! *We* ain't afeared of the peelers. 'Ere goes the ballet."

He danced off in the moonlight, shaking his fingers in the air with wild gesticulations and kicking his short bandy legs high, right and left, — but softly, softly, as if he were shod with felt.

The "first player" stood for a moment bewildered by this wild scheme to scare the manager. Its absurdity seemed to sober him. He strode off suddenly after the dancing figure. A clutch stopped it.

"You fool," he said, with an oath, "I mean to burn the house to the ground, and you know it!"

"Well, warn't I agreeable, — if there 's no insurance?" replied the bow-legged man.

"I tell you I heard from Gorham's own mouth that the policy expired yesterday at noon. He and the agent had a burst-up, and he would n't renew. I heard him tell that deadheaded crony of his; you know Gorham has got a tongue that is set on a pivot and wags at both ends."

The stocky, bandy-legged figure swayed back and forth with extravagant manifestations of delight. "That gets Gorham! I 'd have been sorry for the Insurance Company if it wuz ter lose, ye know. Sorry fur true! I always had a soft place in my heart for a corporation — pore motherless thing!"

His prominent teeth gleamed, — it was as much a snarl as a smile.

"We are wastin' time," he said suddenly, with an air of returning to business. "Take this can o' kerosene an' empty it on the floor of the green-room, while I fix the other combustibles."

The "first player" stood amazed. "You blamed idiot!" he exclaimed, "there 's oil enough on these canvases to send the whole place a-flaring like perdition."

The thickset man's fierceness returned.

"Who is killin' this cat," he snarled angrily, — "you or me? I had my grudge agin this theatre jes' a-dunnin' night an' day ter be paid, an' I promised ter help ye *ef I bossed the job;* ain't that the trade?"

"The shortest way," muttered the "first player," yielding the point. He caught up the can and disappeared in the direction of the green-room.

The stocky figure on the stage was so suddenly joined by another that Ned rubbed his eyes, thinking he saw two where there was but one.

"I got the star's wardrobe out o' the dressin'-room," the newcomer said in an agitated whisper.

"Keep dark," said the thickset man, — he nodded toward the exit where the "first player" had disappeared. "He don't suspicion nothin'; he thinks there ain't a soul here but him an' me. He bargained that nothing should be took! He said that he ain't a thief, an' the goods would get us found out.

But *you* just make the haul anyhow, — but make it sly, for true."

The two rascals went through the dumb show of much merry scorn of the "first player's" stipulations.

"Our pals have tolled off the night watchman, — an' they 're workin' at the safe now. Dynamite is the word, — it 's a time lock, they think."

This was overwhelming to Ned, who had not dreamed that the receipts were kept in the theatre over night, — a considerable sum must have been realized from that crowded house.

The newcomer was starting off. The thick-set scamp beckoned him back. "Did the star leave anything besides the rich costumes?"

"Left gloves."

The attitude of the stocky figure expressed disappointment.

"Left handkerchief."

The disappointment evidently deepened.

"Left studs on dressing-table — diamonds — very fine!"

The speaker disappeared, with a triumphant wave of the hand.

The bandy-legged rascal, inflated with the pride of the moment, strode down to the dark foot-lamps.

"The keerlessness of one man blesses the keerfulness of another," he declaimed, addressing the empty auditorium.

This was doubtless the finest presentation of a villain ever seen upon these boards, for this was the genuine article.

Whether a light suddenly sprang up in one corner of the building, whether Ned heard the crackling of burning timber and canvas, or whether these impressions were delusions of his own over-excited brain, he could never say. He was possessed by the fear of being burned alive in the intricacies of this place, knowing no door, and no window save the one at which he had entered.

This anxiety dominated even his terror of being discovered by these rascals, although he knew they would have wrung his neck without a moment's compunction to prevent him from blabbing. He sprang up and stole tremulously off through the darkness, striving

to rouse his fainting memory and his instinct for locality, and to find the window. How many times he circled around the dusky labyrinth he never knew. All at once he felt a great lightening of his spirits, for he saw suddenly before him a black oblong space which he instantly discerned to be a door. Noiselessly, lightly, he sped to the aperture to find himself in the dark corridor of the building. This passage, of course, followed the direction of the wall of the semicircular auditorium, but this fact was not apparent to Ned, except as revealed gradually by the sense of touch, for no longer did he have even the faint light of the remote windows above the gallery, and the darkness was intense, almost total, indeed. Sometimes a vague glimmer came from doors a bit ajar, and giving upon the dim auditorium within, but these occurred at long intervals, and looking fearfully over his shoulder he could not distinguish the portal by which he had entered. It was gone, — vanished in the gloom! As he stood gazing back for this one landmark, which he had thought he might

keep as guide, he heard a sound in the utter silence that made him quail, — a regular throbbing beat which he recognized presently as the plunging of his own heart. He must needs have courage, he reasoned within himself, as he leaned back faint and tremulous against the wall, or he would perish here like a rat in a trap.

He began now to press on swiftly, some orderly instinct of his nature soothed and his spirit quieted by the release from the chaos of unaccustomed objects which had confused him behind the scenes. The smooth corridor, the absence of all obstruction, the sense of progress, as if so conventional a passage must lead to some objective point of exit, some chance of escape, encouraged him. He had known little as to the usual construction of theatres, but rallying his faculties, his memory, his intuition, his observation, he began to appreciate where he was. The wall on his left hand, he reflected, must inclose those stores by which the greater frontage on the street was utilized; in their rear the immense semi-

circular auditorium of the theatre filled the space, for the shops were of a kind that required no great conveniences of storage, — he remembered them now, a florist's establishment, a tobacconist's stand, a photographer's gallery, — and most of the rooms of the upper stories were occupied as offices. Thus the lofty windows above the gallery gave the auditorium of the theatre its only source of ventilation and of light except, indeed, from artificial means. A door opened on the side street, and some windows were in the rear, and the house was provided with no other exit in front than a great door, at the end of a long, tunnel-like lobby, opening upon the broad avenue, which served for the admission and the dispersal of the audience.

Even while he was mentally recapitulating these points he became suddenly uncertain as to this unique source of light, for as he progressed the darkness about him had become visibly mitigated. It was dimness rather than obscurity now, — a medium dull indeed, but which permitted the discrimination of sur-

rounding objects. Ned paused suspiciously. Silence reigned, — dead silence! No conflagration as yet! He asked himself if he could be approaching some door or window, some opportunity of exit hitherto unknown to him, for the corridor, the periphery, as it were, of the semicircular auditorium, was light enough now for him to distinguish the curving walls on either hand, the terra-cotta tints predominating in their frescoed panels, the darker terra-cotta tone of the carpet beneath his feet, — nay, as he came to the point of intersection with the lobby leading to the street door he saw the gilded frames of the portraits of famous actors on the walls, and recognized Booth, Barrett, McCullough, and Irving! The great door was fast shut — no hope thence. The little wicket of the barricade across the lobby, that served to hold back the press of the people from the ticket-taker, was ajar, and from the box-office, at one side, came a dim suffusion of light. He stood still with a wildly beating heart, — for he heard from an inner room beyond the office the sibilant, cautious

tone of a half whisper, and now and again the metallic clink of some instrument dexterously handled. The thieves were still working at the safe, — and as yet it held fast!

It was instinct rather than a realized prudence that set the frightened boy scurrying like a rabbit away from that dangerous zone of light. Miscreants such as these, suddenly discovered in their nefarious job, would not hesitate at murder, more than at larceny and arson, and his bones in the midst of the débris of the great fire would never be found to tell his forlorn fate. But that the wall guided him from the foyer and along the corridor, he could not have regained the stage door; he hardly knew how he had reached it; he realized only that he was once more in the inextricable tangle of flats and wings and ropes and stage furniture behind the scenes, and wildly seeking the window at which he had gained entrance to this troublous episode in his life.

Still the moonbeams streamed through those lofty casements above the gallery and down

upon the immaterial audience of thronging shadows in the place of the brilliant assemblage so lately vanished thence. With melancholy intimations, the white sheeny radiance sent vague, phantasmal gleams across the broad spread of the stage and along the dreary vistas of the wings, where the sham misery of imagination is wont to ape the real tragedy of life. Here the contrast with the utter darkness was so sharp, the setting for a single figure so conspicuous, that Ned scuttled hastily across the stage, himself like a wavering shadow, and plunged into the turmoil of confusion beyond, searching here and there and everywhere for the back window at which he had entered.

He had lost in a measure the self-control which he had hitherto staunchly maintained. He was awkward, clumsy, agitated. More than once he tangled his foot in a swaying rope; here and there he ran plumply against the huge canvas-covered frames, and set up a quivering totter along their great heights; he wondered that he did not scream outright when at last he fairly fell, plunging bodily

into a mimic boat adjusted on rockers to simulate the tossing of the waves. Nevertheless, hearing the floor resound with the impact of his fall, he had the presence of mind to lie still at the bottom of the craft, listening and fearing that the noise might have roused the thieves to apprehension and a tour of discovery. This would doubtless have ensued, but fortunately for him another sound pervaded the theatre just at that moment, and overpowered the concussion of his fall, — a dull, low roar it was, then utter silence.

Ned knew that the safe had been forced at last, and that the explosion had served to avert the discovery of his presence through the crash of his noisy misadventure. He rose from the boat, trembling, weak, but animated with a new hope. The finding of the craft here intimated that he was near the wall, where it had doubtless been heedlessly thrust aside, for it had naught to do with the play of Hamlet, and the furnishings of the castle of Elsinore filled all the foreground. He must now be near the rear wall, where was the window at which he had entered.

Suddenly he saw before him the dim, wan square in the gloom. The next moment despair fell anew upon him. The sash was down, and secured by some patent device which he had never before seen, and which baffled his trembling fingers.

Then he did scream, — a shrill, muffled cry, — so unlike his sturdy boyish halloo that he hardly recognized his own voice. Somehow it rescued him from the torpor that was stealing over him. He knew that it would rouse those within to a danger of which they had not dreamed. In another moment he might be helpless in their hands.

Instantly he tore off his shoe. One blow with its heel, and the shivered glass was flying in every direction. Through the broken pane he hastily jumped, with the shoe still in his hand. He fell heavily to the ground, and lay crouching in the shadow close in to the wall.

He had indeed given the alarm. There were swift steps within, and then an agitated whispering at the window.

The men were evidently frightened at first, but soon sought to reassure themselves. It was nothing, they said, — the glass was doubtless broken by some accident; a passer-by might have thrown a stone, or perhaps a cracked pane had loosened and fallen out at this crucial moment. "I know that there hollerin' mus' have been a long way off yonder somewhers, anyhow," declared the thickset man. "It sounded sorter muffled an' farlike."

The "first player" seemed to acquiesce, and then silence ensued.

When Ned felt that he could breathe, he gathered up his sore bones and ran down the alley, up the side street, and out upon the broad, deserted avenue. The lamps were all out, municipal thrift trusting for illumination to the wavering moon. A blue light glimmering far up the dusky hill told him that the "owl car" had just passed. An hour or so must elapse before another would appear, for they ran at long intervals. He looked about for a policeman. He saw none. The city

seemed dead. He was unfamiliar with this quarter of the town, but as he sped along he came within sight of a city square. There he knew, under the trees, were often tramps, spending the night on the benches, — sometimes loafers of a better class belated and sleeping off the effect of their potations. Doubtless some of them would know where was the nearest police station or fire-alarm. All that he had seen seemed now so like a dream that he wondered whether after all he were not mistaken, whether the "first player" could really intend to burn the theatre.

As he paused for breath he glanced back in the direction of the building and diagonally across the darkly massed trees of the square. The high steeple of the cathedral was purpling slowly in the dun-colored gloom. Its gilded cross sprang suddenly into view, emblazoned upon the night like a sign in the sky. The dense foliage of the square was outlined against an angry crimson glare in the distance, ever widening and ever deepening. Into its midst a yellow pennon of flame

flaunted to the breeze. The heavy tones of a fire-bell smote the silence suddenly.

There was a movement under the trees. The loungers on the benches were waking. Far up dark intersecting streets came the swift footfalls of boys, who spring up mysteriously at any hour of the night or day, eager to crowd around a fire. There was too the heavy tread of unseen policemen striding through the gloom. The sharp gong of the hose-carriage clamoring in the distance cleared a pass-way for the swinging gallop of its white horses. As it flashed around the corner and whirled out of sight in a second it looked like the chariot and coursers of Phœbus called out on a false alarm of dawn. Two or three hoarse drunken voices were aimlessly calling "Fi-ah! Fi-ah!" and one small boy, excitedly tangling his suspenders as he sought to adjust them, ran along in the middle of the street ceaselessly vociferating, "Number Six is a-comin'!"

And sure enough here was Number Six cumbrously rocking and swaying up the street,

a big, polished, glittering monster, leaving a glowing path of live coals behind it and emitting a cloud of the blackest smoke. The driver of the engine was whipping like mad; its horses were plunging and rearing, and straining every nerve and muscle; its guard of honor, all the boys in the ward, ran admiringly on either side. Ned joined them from force of habit, taking the way back to the burning theatre, dodging at the first crossing the sudden on-rush of the team of the hook-and-ladder truck.

The smoke had hidden the moon and stars. Its murky canopy overhung the massive building and the vast crowd, all illuminated by the angry red flames darting from roof and windows. The jets of water rose high in dusky, half-descried curves, and fell hissing into the conflagration within. There were many of these ill-defined arches spanning the grim panorama, for Number Nine was in the alley, two other engines stood in the side street, two were in front of the building, and still three others guarded the safety of the block above.

The firemen in their helmets and uniforms, some enveloped in long rubber coats, were here, there, and everywhere. They might have seemed the weird spirits of the flame, seen through its writhings and contortions as if they were in its very midst. Presently word was passed about the crowd that their efforts were subduing the terrible element. Ned watched with painful anxiety their exertions. He remembered many a scene like this when he had reveled in the noise and excitement, when a fire had seemed only a grand spectacular display, its interest heightened by the commensurate danger and gallant courage of the firemen. Then he had had no thought of the loss which it represented, the distress, the men thrown out of employment, a great financial factor blotted from commercial progress.

Now, how feverishly he hoped that the building might be saved, — that the deep iniquity of which he had gained full knowledge by his own wrong-doing might be thwarted! He felt that he could hardly live carrying this secret, and yet he had already promised

himself never to divulge it. He said to himself that he might not always be able to keep the curb on circumstance. His story might be doubted, or only half believed. He might draw suspicion on himself, — implicate himself in the crime of arson. That meant the Penitentiary, — and a long term. His narrative would be in part a confession. He had choused the management out of half a dollar, — and that was stealing! He must first impeach his own honesty, then ask to be believed when he accused others. And what might not these others say in contradiction and recrimination! Were they not as likely to be believed as he? Certainly a boy who stole could scarcely hope he would not be suspected of other crimes if there were any evidence against him. Ned dreaded too the malignity of the men, — if they were capable of firing the theatre they were capable of falsely accusing him. No! — no! — he would never tell that he had witnessed any drama on those boards save the tragedy of Hamlet.

Was the fire less than before? They said

so. It seemed to him hotter, redder, fiercer. Before long he knew that the fight was hopeless. The west wall gave way. Through the great gaps the stage became visible. The flames were licking up first one and then another of the many heavy "sets." As the lurid glare was flung upon some representation of Alpine heights or moonlit lake, or grim castle battlements or bosky woodland scene, — idealized infinitely in its unique frame of wreathing flames, — the crowd gave it "hands," as an audience is wont to applaud some fine new manifestation of the scene-painter's art.

It seemed to Ned, knowing what he did, very melancholy. He shook his head, and his heart was heavy.

As he stood there a familiar face attracted his attention.

"Is that you, Tom?" he called out.

"Nothin' shorter," replied a stout, undersized boy, nodding a round bullet head, surmounted by an old gray cap.

"Wher' 's Pete?" demanded Ned, for this was Pete's brother.

"I s'posed he wuz along of you. I seen ye together after dark a-makin' off."

"Naw, — he hain't been with me sence." Ned hesitated.

A look of blank surprise was on Tom's face. "I made sure he wuz with you," he said. "Pete hain't been home this night."

CHAPTER IV

When Master Peter Bateman ran away after seeing his friend into the theatre and past the dragon he did not run far.

That curious, gigantic flower, with petals of fluttering palm leaves and pistil and stamens of pyramidal gas jets, was still a-bloom in the darkness, and a friendly hail from beneath it arrested his steps.

"Hy're, Pete," sang out half a dozen boyish voices.

"Hev a smoke?" and a soggy stump of a cigar was extended with a grimy paw and a wide grin of invitation. This grin surrounded another stump of a cigar, which was all aglow and precariously held between the squirrel-teeth of a youngster of twelve.

"Sim Gray hes been round inquirin' after ye, Pete," added the boy. "He tole us if

we seen ye ter tell ye ter wait fur him 'ere. He 'll be 'long d'rec'ly."

This message obliterated for the moment Pete's recollection of his errand to the station.

"What 's Sim Gray a-wantin' of me, I wonder?" he said, a trifle dubiously. For Pete, slippery and sly as he was, had often been a target for the practical jokes of a clique of bigger boys, of which Sim Gray was a prominent member. The simplicity incident to Pete's comparatively tender years was an odd contrast to the duplicity of his moral nature; and the tricky ignoramus, overreached and bamboozled, was a more amusing spectacle to these more knowing fellows than any honest "greeny" could furnish. But beyond making a fool of him they had done him no harm hitherto, and Pete was rather proud of being in request by a person of Sim Gray's inches and importance.

Pete sat down on the curbstone to wait, took the stump of cigar which had been gleaned from the dirty sidewalk, lighted it at the grinning monkey's beside him, and

summoning all the strength of stomach for which boys are noted, tried hard to smoke it.

Sim Gray was one of those weak and wicked young fellows with a pocket full of money and a taste for low company, who are forever the prey of other young fellows not so weak, and yet more wicked. His father was very respectable, socially and financially, and more than once he had been obliged to strain this double respectability to the utmost to keep the name of this hopeful scion out of the police reports and the scion himself out of jail. The boy had reformed time and again. He had been sent away from home and kept under the strictest surveillance. Now, however, as he had been permitted to return, he was secretly associating with his former intimates, who sponged upon him and fleeced him as of yore, and stood ready to throw the blame upon him at the first approach of trouble. To him they seemed only lively, good-natured young fellows who knew the "ropes" and were "seeing life." The police understood them more accurately as young scamps, who

had been often suspected of small crimes which generally could not be proved upon them; nevertheless more than one of the party had seen the inside of a jail. This fact reinforced Pete's hesitation to join them when Sim Gray and his friends came along, which they presently did.

Sim Gray was a spindling specimen of seventeen, with light, lank hair, big blood-shot light eyes, and a fawn-colored suit, — the coat much soiled with leaning against dirty bars.

He gave Pete a wink and a grimace as he passed, but he said nothing. It was one of the others who called out, "Come on, Pete, — we 'll give ye a beer; Sim 's goin' ter set 'em up."

Pete was still dubious, but flattered. He rose, flung away the cigar stump, and took account with his shaken stomach to ascertain if it could stand a beer at Sim Gray's expense.

They proceeded down several side streets to a low saloon. There were gaudy immoral

pictures on the walls; the floor was filthy with "tobacco juice;" the glasses were sadly smeared when Sim Gray undertook to "set 'em up." Pete was most cordially entreated. He had not one beer only, but several. Sim Gray, aided and abetted by the others, hospitably insisted that Pete should "smile" again and yet once more. Pete grew immensely important and pleased. It never occurred to him that they were systematically fuddling him, so that they might enjoy the spectacle of his degradation. When his silly antics proclaimed him fairly on his first "drunk" a howl of delight went up from the young hoodlums; the older besotted habitués of the saloon chuckled over their glasses; even the saturnine bar-tender was in high glee, and offered another beer at the expense of the institution.

The hubbub at last attracted the attention of a policeman in the vicinity. It was well, perhaps, that it was he on this beat, for this man was a teetotaler and a member of a temperance society. The sound of "drunk

and disorderly" was to him like the trumpet to the war-horse, and "running them in" he accounted the chief of his duties and his dearest pleasure. He appeared suddenly in the doorway with a countenance as stern and fixed as if it were carved in stone.

"Wh-wh-why — I wuz jes' goin' ter the station ter see you!" exclaimed Pete, springing up at the sight of the glitter of the buttons on the blue uniform, and with an abrupt realization of the purpose with which he had quitted the theatre.

A wild yell of coarse laughter from the crowd greeted Pete's announcement.

"You can't go none too soon," said the policeman, collaring Pete.

Then he looked about him severely. "I'd love to lock you all up," he exclaimed fervently.

Nobody laughed now. He was known to construe the law very strictly.

"When you teach a boy to drink you teach him to lie, to thieve, and worse, for here" — he struck the bar with his clenched fist —

"is the place where a man puts the rope around his own neck."

So he went out and left silence behind him. Pete's drunken mood shifted to gravity as he was propelled along the street by the policeman's strong hand on his collar. Being now in trouble himself, he became all the more anxious to report Ned. He told his story, incoherently enough, however, hampered by the wanderings of his fevered brain, the tricks of his thickened tongue, and much interrupted by the sarcastic and incredulous comments of the policeman.

"He — he — he is a-stealin'! He — he's a-a-a-a-stealin' star's di'monds — right now — outer dressin'-room" — expounded Pete eagerly.

"Mighty likely," exclaimed the policeman in irony.

"Gorham's Theaytre, — got in by back window," spluttered Pete.

"I believe you!" The policeman gave a gruff laugh.

Pete soon ceased to care that his captor

seemed to regard this but as a drunken vagary. Before they reached the lock-up he was growing very ill. He was barely conscious of being thrust into a tiny darkened room where there was a narrow bunk. He fell upon it, and there he lay sleeping the sleep of the very drunk until late the next day.

He woke with a splitting headache. For a time he was conscious of nothing but this fact. It was suddenly aggravated by a harsh, grating noise. The key was turning reluctantly in the lock. He frowned sullenly and looked over his shoulder. The policeman who had arrested him was standing in the doorway.

Then Pete realized where he was and recollected all that had happened. He had never imagined that he could be so disgraced. Everybody whom he knew would find it out, for his name would be printed in the police reports in the daily papers, — in Ned's paper too. Ned himself would read it. He remembered the threats he had made against Ned, — that

he would give information against Ned to the police, forsooth, — that he would compass Ned's arrest! These threats were not fulfilled as he had promised himself. It would be but natural that Ned should gloat over his coarse, foolish degradation. Because he could not remain sober till he reached the station he must spend the night in the lock-up while Ned was enjoying the play. "An' the gump would never have drempt o' gittin' in the theaytre if it had n't a-been fur me," he thought.

His mortification and self-reproach gave way at once to a surly jealousy and malignity, for it is more characteristic of such a boy as Pete Bateman, when forced by circumstances to recognize his faults, to seek to blame and injure others and find parallel misdeeds in their conduct, rather than to repent and amend.

"A cheatin' scamp, — I wisht I had Ned 'ere now," he thought virulently.

These feelings were in his heart when the policeman spoke.

"Boy," he said gravely, "now that ye 're

sorter sober I want ye ter tell that story again that ye told las' night about that burned theatre."

Pete started up in his bunk, — his headache forgotten. He had not before thought of this chance. Although Ned could not be caught in the active perpetration of the misdeed, he could still be accused of having climbed into the window of the theatre with nefarious designs.

"Maybe I 'll make it lively fur him yet," Pete reflected with satisfaction.

Then he drawled with an affectation of indifference, "I never said nothin' 'bout no *burned* theaytre sence I wuz born."

As he thus corrected the policeman his broad face was ornamented with an expression of importance and extreme rectitude. His narrow eyes were downcast as if in reflection, and his manner intimated that he was willing, but did not seek to impart information. He noticed, however, that a man in citizen's dress, a thin, genteel, unobtrusive person, had entered too, and closed the door, but he did not

see that upon the mention of the burned theatre this man slyly touched with the toe of his boot the broad, burly foot of the tall policeman, as an admonition not to put that clumsy member into Pete's explanation.

"Well, — what *did* you say, then?" the policeman asked.

"I said that a boy had clomb inter the back winder o' Gorham's Theaytre. An' I begged an' plead with him ter come out, 'cause I knowed he wuz goin' ter steal outer the star's dressin'-room."

"What was he going to steal?" demanded the man in citizen's dress.

Pete hesitated. He was not quite sure as to what kind of portable property was most likely to be found in the orbit of "stars."

"Di'monds wuz what he had set his head fur," he replied at last, quite recklessly.

He wanted to disgrace Ned by preferring a criminal charge against him. He did not suppose that it could be sustained, for he did not imagine that the star had lost anything. But it gave the minor fraud of surreptitiously

entering at the back window a heinous aspect, which would insure to Ned some unpleasant experiences as a sequel for the pleasure which Pete's suggestion had given to him, and which Pete could not share. He was acute enough to realize that if he merely reported Ned's adventure and success in seeing the play without paying his way, the management could scarcely be expected to take the trouble necessary to punish this offense, already a matter of the past. That window sash would be securely closed hereafter, and a stricter watch maintained. He noticed with satisfaction, therefore, that at the mention of the word "diamonds" the big policeman opened his eyes very wide, and cast a significant glance at the man in citizen's dress, as who should say, "I told you so."

The other man seemed to refuse to respond to the policeman's openly expressed excitement.

"Did the boy have any accomplices?" he asked coolly. "Was he helping anybody, — or was anybody helping him?"

"Not as I knows on," replied Pete.

There was so deep a disappointment in the policeman's honest face that Pete was moved to detail the story all over again, not perceiving wherein was the lack so evidently regretted.

"Whether he actially stole anything or not I dunno," he remarked virtuously in conclusion; "I fairly wrastled in prayer with him ter git him ter come down outer that window."

"And how are we to know that you did not go in with him and help steal?" suddenly asked the man dressed in black.

Pete looked up with a galvanic start. He fairly gasped. Then his breath and logic returned together.

"Because," he cried with a voice singularly like the voice of innocence, "I guv the alarm ter the police straight off. I wuz locked up 'ere an' fas' asleep 'fore ten o'clock."

"Fur a fac'." The policeman nodded regretfully. "I never believed a word that he said, the kid was that drunk. Ye never seen a kid so drunk."

Somehow Pete began to feel a trifle proud of his achievement.

"Oh, I'm a gay bird when I git started," he said with a callow chirp that was meant for a laugh; but his voice was as weak as his stomach.

The man in citizen's dress was visibly impressed. He no longer strove to pretend indifference. He and the policeman consulted earnestly, but in a very low and guarded tone for a few moments. Then they both went out, locking the door, and leaving Pete lying on the bed and holding his splitting head in both his hands. His pride was no panacea for these pangs.

The policeman came back presently, hurried and peremptory. Pete was hustled up. Very dubious and slow was Pete. His reluctance was noticed by his captor.

"Shake it up, boy," he exclaimed impatiently. "Ye ain't goin' in fur a drunk an' disorderly *now*. Ye're jus' goin' before a magistrate for a private examination 'bout them di'monds an' that burned theatre."

"Is the theaytre burned?" faltered Pete, astounded. "Burned? — fur a fac'?"

"Ter the ground. But stir yer stumps, boy. I can't wait here all day."

It never occurred to Pete until he was in the presence of the magistrate and in the act of swearing to the statement which he had already made to the policeman that the affairs of this great world are not regulated after the haphazard fashion of boys and their puerile feuds and follies. Pete had involved himself in the tremendous machinery of the law, and in its inexorable course what might not befall such an atom! He dared not vary a word, for there beside him stood the policeman and the man in citizen's dress, whom he now understood to be a detective. They were both listening attentively. Any change, any faltering, might implicate him in he knew not what crimes perpetrated at the theatre last night, with which he was sure, too, Ned had naught to do.

Pete roused his memory to repeat the story exactly as he had told it at first. He had

never before exerted so great a strain on his faculties. He tried to gauge the impression it produced, and he observed the gravity with which the subject was treated. This filled him with the wildest apprehensions. He had heretofore thought that Ned might be arrested and might have to appear in the police court, which would mortify him within an inch of his life, but he had anticipated nothing more serious. Now he understood that there was an investigation on foot, instituted by the manager-owner of the theatre, the manager and actors of the traveling company, the merchants who had had stocks of goods in the adjoining stores, and others who had sustained losses by the fire, all of whom would unite in the prosecution of the criminals when captured. There was no prophesying what might happen, — what Ned when arrested would say and perhaps swear to against him.

Pete was a moral quicksand. There was nothing stable in his character. Even his duplicity could not be counted on. Although quaking in the very clutches of the law, he

was revolving in his mind such double-dealing as should protect him against the problematic lies which Ned might tell, when he in his turn should be arrested. For none is so quick to suspect others of falsehood as a liar. Pete made his scheme, and watched events, and waited.

The warrant for Ned's arrest was already issued. Pete thought the men were talking in a strangely unguarded manner, considering his presence. They had forgotten him, he concluded sagely. His sly eyes glittered through their narrow slits as he reflected how he could take advantage of their imprudence. Ned was not to be arrested immediately, he understood. The detective was to "shadow" him in the hope of seeing him communicate with some of the gang of thieves and incendiaries who had robbed and burned the theatre, for they naturally concluded that he was only an accomplice of others, as a boy alone could hardly have plotted and executed a crime of such magnitude.

"Shadder him as ye may, ye 'll never

arrest him. I 'll tip him the wink ter skedaddle outer town," Pete thought triumphantly.

For he was ready to undo all he had done, since his malignity was likely to rebound upon himself. He did not doubt his ability to recall the irrevocable. Pete perhaps likened himself to that "man in our town —

> Who was so wondrous wise,
> He jumped into a brier-bush
> And scratched out both his eyes.
> And when he found his eyes were out,
> With all his might and main
> He jumped into another bush,
> And *scratched them in* again."

Now the law of the land is not that kind of a bush. Pete, metaphorically speaking, was still stone blind.

He had a vague realization of this fact when the policeman said agreeably, "Come, youngster, we 've got to go back. Ye 'll get some breakfast then — if ye 're able ter eat it."

Pete was amazed and half frightened. Then he straightened himself up like a man.

"I 've got a right ter my trial *now*, — like other drunk an' disorderlies," he protested. "I wanter go home."

"Cheese it!" the policeman succinctly admonished him. "Ye 're ter be held fur a witness against they arrest that other boy."

"But they ain't got no right ter lock *me* up — an' me jes' a witness," blustered Pete.

The policeman laughed lazily, languidly turning his quid of tobacco between his teeth. "A boy is never such a fool as when he undertakes ter know everything! I 've seen a magistrate commit a slippery witness ter *jail* in default o' bond fur safe-keeping against a trial. But it 's just the lock-up ye 're goin' ter, — you ain 't had *your* trial yet, — an' 't ain't fur long. Come on. Stir yer stumps."

So all the rest of that day Pete lay upon his narrow bunk, bemoaning his luck that he had ever seen Ned, groaning because of his aching head and flimsy stomach, wondering what had really happened at the theatre, what part Ned could have borne in it, what Ned would say when confronted with his false and perjured friend, and how the familiar building looked lying low and in ruins.

Dreary enough, to be sure, — with the

charred heaps of timber and bricks, the smouldering embers and ashes, and the smoke still curling up into the May sunshine. The east wall, although tottering and with great blackened gaps, still stood. Against one of the frescoed panels and close to the ruins of a proscenium box was a gilded mask of Folly in alto-rilievo. The decorator had substituted for the more usual delineations of comedy and tragedy a jester's head and bauble and, on the opposite side of the proscenium, as the antithesis of frivolity, the type of heroism, a knight's helmet with closed visor and the point of a lance. This mask had fallen with the west wall, but the smirched face of Folly, surmounted by the smoke-grimed cap and bells, still leered fantastically down upon the ruins. It was not without sarcastic suggestions. Where so much of worth had perished Folly yet remained. It was a prominent object and attracted much attention. As Ned, who was out on an errand, paused among a knot of idlers and shading his eyes with his hand looked up, its grimace seemed to him

less jocose than sinister. He thought of all that he and it had witnessed last night. This was a secret between them. He resolved that he would be as dumb as the dumb image. Neither had made a sign as yet — save — all at once a grotesque fancy crossed him! In the flicker of the sunshine and the shimmering undulations of the smoke the face looked at him — and winked!

He knew that this was only a fancy, but it frightened him. Was he going to be ill? he asked himself. Was he losing his self-control, his hold on his sharp wits? He turned away hastily. He felt that he could not maintain his self-possession in the presence of the crowd if Folly should again mysteriously, fraternally, sign to him.

He turned away so very hastily that he ran against a man — a thin, genteel, unobtrusive person — in citizen's dress, who was standing just behind him. As Ned made a rough boyish gesture of apology he lifted his pale agitated face. The man's keen gray eyes scanned it closely.

CHAPTER V

Ned gave scant heed to his work that day, so absorbed was he in reviewing the last night's scenes, in considering his position, and in anxious forebodings. Now and then he sought to comfort himself by reflecting that doubtless the worst was over, — only Pete knew that he had been to the theatre, and how could Pete, how could any one, imagine that he had not come out with the other people behind the scenes — employees, actors, and the many various supernumeraries — by way of the side door?

After a time he became alarmed lest his manner betray the trouble that beset him. Once when he opened the door of one of the editorial rooms and called out "Copee!" to apprise the magnate presiding at the desk that the printers were waiting, he was dismayed to hear, instead of his wonted peremptory chirp,

such a strained, sharp cry that he hardly recognized his own voice.

A young man, trying to sustain the heavy draught upon the imagination which writing a book-notice without reading the book must always impose, turned from his work with a growl.

"That confounded boy's throat needs oiling! He is just one all-fired creak!" he cried irritably.

The little rebuff wounded Ned as an intentional cruelty might have done. His anxiety had made him sensitive and sore. Generally he felt amply able to take care of himself, and his mental attitude toward others might be described in the simple phrase, "Look out!" He was usually ready and efficient in any work entrusted to him, but to-day he was awkward, under foot, out of time and place, and very inattentive and slow to understand. His pallid face wore a hunted, pleading look, of which he was unconscious; and he was on the point of bursting into tears when a momentary notice of it elicited a word of sympathy.

He had been sent to the "funny man's" desk in the adjoining room to hurry him up. The "funny man," as the junior compositors called the wit of the staff, did not mind being hurried. There was a laugh still in his eyes as his pencil traced the final words. His face was so ruddy as to accent the light tint of his blond hair as it blowsed over his forehead. He was a robust man with a fine digestion, and the sight of unhappiness was abhorrent to him.

"Hungry?" he asked with a comical intonation as the little devil waited.

Ned's face mantled with a sickly smile, — very readily, indeed, for the "funny man's" reputation for wit was so well established that everybody laughed at everything he said, and he did not have to crack a *bona fide* joke more than once or twice a year to sustain it. Thus he became chary of his good things.

Ned's face was more pitiful with the sickly smile upon it than in anxious gravity.

The good-natured man's finger and thumb were inserted in the pocket of his waistcoat.

"Methinks," he said with mock seriousness, "methinks the goodly goober is the fruit of the earth in which thy soul most delighteth."

He twirled a silver quarter of a dollar across the desk, and the devil caught it.

"With best wishes for your digestion," said the "funny man" politely.

And the devil laughed again.

Little did either foresee the damage that coin was to do — even though diverted from the purchase of peanuts.

For the devil felt the need of a change of air.

A proofreader and his copyholder, engaged in their trying exercises hard by, had shown some impatience of this puerile dialogue carried on at full voice. Being silently motioned out by the "funny man" with a facetious air of mock mystery, Ned had nothing to do for a time after rendering up his copy in the composing-room, but to lean on the sill of the high window in the hall of the fifth story and await orders.

As he looked out he saw that the sun was

tending toward the west, the mansard roofs and domes and steeples defined sharply against the dazzling cumulus clouds. The city stretched out so far beneath it that one might fancy it must come to the ground within the corporate limits. Ned loved to imagine that its fiery cresset, falling and falling, was caught at last on the distant tower of the water-works, for always as it disappeared behind those huge timbers the white effulgence of the electric light burst suddenly forth and blazed there, the Sun of Science, through all the dark midnights. It was, however, too early as yet for this illusion. The golden lustre of the afternoon still dominated the lengthening shadows; the church spires glinted; the points of the myriads of lightning-rods burned as if tipped with living fire; that fat, prosperous exile, the English sparrow, was yet up and about, busy in the accomplishment of his equivocal mission here; the cloud of smoke, rollicking out of the chimneys of a furniture factory over the way, was white and gold and fawn-colored, and gleamed iridescent against the azure sky; the shadow

of this ethereal thing, that itself had no substance, chased it hilariously down the street, leaving, truant-like, the fires and the toiling men and the clanking machinery below.

Perhaps the motion roused a sort of emulation in the jaded boy; perhaps only the wind suggested the idea as it dipped over the tall chimneys and softly touched his cheek with a cinder, and tossed his slightly curling red hair.

"I ought ter go to the Pawk an' git some fresh air," he said. "That 's jes' what 's the matter with me."

He fingered the coin in his pocket. It seemed singularly opportune that it should have been given to him, for in conscience he could not spend his small wages on car-fare, and the park was out of walking distance unless he had plenty of time at his disposal.

In that interval between the day's work and the rush which precedes going to press at night he made his way out, and was soon whizzing swiftly along in the cable car toward the southern terminus of the road.

He sat quite undisturbed for a time, lulled

by the monotonous motion, finding the sunshine warm and cheery, and all forgetful of the fire and last night's scenes. He was on the point of falling asleep in his corner when he roused himself with a sudden start. Perhaps it was only his guilty conscience that kept his fears alert, or perhaps it was that odd, mesmeric sensation which one experiences when becoming the subject of a steady, stealthy gaze. It has been described as a feeling as if there were a cobweb on one's cheek. At any rate, Ned, sitting bolt upright, knew, although he did not see, that a tall, thin man on the opposite seat had just been keenly staring at him; but now this stranger was gazing pensively out of the window.

Somehow his face seemed singularly familiar, — yet Ned could not at once recollect having seen it before. Oddly enough, it brought back the thought of last night's terrible scenes, of his heavy, felonious secrets, the dismal black walls of the burned theatre, the distress of many men thrown suddenly out of employment, the imagined despair of

the ruined owner. Where had he ever seen this man? Ned wondered. Why should his face be thus associated with these suggestions?

Suddenly he remembered the gilded mask of Folly, the silly wink, the knowing grimace! This was the man against whom he had run as he fled from his own foolish fancy.

It seemed strange to him that he should meet this man at the scene of the fire, and now again on the way to the park; but in a moment he was arguing within himself that the encounter had no significance, — every idler in the town had been that day to the burned theatre, and the park was of course a public resort. It was only an accident. For what could the man have to do with him?

"I 'm so full o' secrets," he said to himself, "that I feel like a pack o' dynamite, — ef anybody was ter tech me I believe I 'd bust!"

The renewal of all his anxieties had destroyed the pleasure and the expected benefits of the jaunt. In vain for Ned the trees, in their fresh May verdure, leaned over the broad

drives and walks, while the young birds in the branches discussed with their parents the propriety of postponing bed-time for half an hour longer. All the children were still up, they argued, — and that was very true, for the park swarmed with small specimens of humanity, and the perennial perambulator was on the march. In vain the fountains tossed up their spray of rainbows. In vain refreshing sounds came from the lake, where waterfowl splashed in and out of the ripples, and the beat of oars sent a skiff skimming about, and a swan, resting motionless on the reflection of the evening sky, suggested the starry Swan whose element is the sky itself.

From the greensward and in the midst of beds of coleus, that gleamed like huge jewels of garnet or topaz, rose a great pedestal of polished granite, surmounted by a statue in bronze. It had been erected in honor of some great man. Ned did not know of whom, and he had never cared to ask. Now he looked at it speculatively as he sat down on a bench opposite.

"An' what did he ever do to make him great?" he demanded of himself.

The answer came promptly from his sharp common sense, "Did right!"

There was the secret of greatness in a nutshell. For those great men who were not good as well are certainly not honored for that wherein they failed. Always what was done right predominated. And those men who do right in the small details of the simplest daily life, although the result may be inconspicuous, are as great as any who leave their memory in bronze. Ned knew this, — that a printer's devil has as fine an opportunity for heroism as he "who taketh a city." And he had been ambitious morally as well as mentally.

"But what can I do now?" he thought. How could he tell his story, and make reparation, and quiet his conscience without danger of being believed the accomplice of the men who had stolen the money and the star's diamonds, and burned the beautiful theatre, and ruined the manager for their revenge and

wicked malice? If he should confess that he had choused the management out of half a dollar he impeached his own honesty. Could he then consistently ask to be believed innocent of other crimes?

Besides, what good would his confession do now? The rascals were no doubt far enough away by this time. The theatre was burned, the money and diamonds were gone, the manager was ruined; and Ned thought that unless he held his tongue with unparalleled discretion he might be punished for the crimes of the absconded scamps.

As he sat there, his elbows on his knees, his hat drawn down, his face pale and grave, his hands holding his throbbing head, the fact that he was troubled in his mind and tortured by his conscience was very evident to a tall, quiet, thin man, with an unobtrusive manner and a pensive aspect, who chanced to saunter by more than once.

Ned did not notice him, however. Only now and then by an effort he tore his attention from the subject that so absorbed him, and

upbraided himself for wasting his opportunity for the beneficial influences of a change of air, of scene, of thought that might of itself serve to solve the problems which racked him. He lifted his head and addressed himself to an earnest attempt to divert his mind. It was rare, since his life was spent in vibration between the business portions of the city and the tenement district, that he saw the equipages of people of wealth and fashion, which now flashed by in quick succession. He noticed that they were filled with the silken shimmer of dainty attire and bright pink-and-white faces, which seemed to bloom in the delicate shadow of the quivering lace or fringe of parasols; these parasols, being white or violet or of roseate hue, were themselves of flower-like suggestion, resembling some species of convolvuli. An automobile astonished his gaze rather more than it surprised the sophisticated horses, but it was to these animals he awarded the palm as a means of locomotion. In them he felt a sort of proprietary interest. He noted the value of their fine form; he appraised their

glossy coats; he narrowed his eyes to discriminate details of their harness, often so slight as to seem barely to restrain their activities, and hiding no point of beauty or grace. His infancy had been spent in a horse-raising country, but his interest was really apart from memory, and only stimulated by having heard his father's enthusiastic talk of notable favorites which he had seen or shod, for the Scotch emigrant had first settled as a wheelwright and blacksmith in New Arcady, Kentucky, and there he had remained until the last few years of his life.

The sleek, whirling spokes, as they caught the light and glittered, soon dazzled Ned's tired eyes; the gay voices that floated down to him seemed all out of tune with the melancholy conditions of his struggling, troubled existence. Only once did he look up with keen and spontaneous attention; a tandem, a thing much in vogue in this place, of fine blood bays went by like the wind, — so fast indeed that he hardly recognized the manager and his elderly skeleton-like friend. Ned rose

from his seat to stare after them in doubt and eagerness, all unmindful that a man on a bench in the shade of a tree opposite had noted his excitement, and the identity of the parties who had elicited it, and was steadily gazing at him.

Ned did not seat himself again, but began to wander along the shores of the lake. There was all about it a hedge or border of the Southern plant called *Yucca gloriosa*, and its bayonet-like leaves and tall shafts with their white pendent liliaceous blossoms were reflected in the smooth water, all as motionless as if the whole were some softly vivid aquarelle. Presently a skiff, freighted with children, came gliding along with ripples about its prow and a wake of foam in which the reflections were lost for a time, the snowy blossoms only gradually sketched anew on the surface as by some trembling, tentative, unpracticed brush. The detective, now strolling along the broad drive, could ill keep his eye upon the boy as he dawdled among the tall, flowering spikes; even less when Ned

abruptly came to a stand-still to gaze fixedly upon the countenance of a swan, waddling in its ungainly style up the green bank toward a small, daintily befrilled, rosy child, who with her nurse's arm protectively about her waist, was making bold to offer the bird a bit of cracker in disregard of the mandatory sign, "Don't feed the Swans."

The detective found it yet more difficult to dispose of himself appropriately when, as he still incidentally followed the boy, Ned paused in further reaches of the park to gaze through a high fence, which was constructed in a pretty, rustic fashion, and which served to keep in a few deer. One of these had a fawn, and the little creature was beside its mother. The boy had not known before that these animals are dappled with white in early youth, and this indisputable presentment of the fact brought him bolt upright against the fence, where he stared in the interstices while both hands grasped the structure.

The officer could not follow his example, without attracting attention, for what is emi-

nently sane in one stage of human development would be evidence of an unbalanced mind in a more advanced age and a different station of life. He was not, however, willing to pass on, lest he lose sight of the boy; and something, he could not say what, convinced him that there was an objective point in Ned's wanderings, albeit he himself, perhaps, was as yet unconscious whither, in his undiscriminated mental processes, his steps were tending. The officer met the emergency by pausing in the middle of the road and taking out a cigar. The wind was stirring anew, and thus he was enabled to make the business of deliberately lighting it a longer operation than was really necessary. More than one match flickered and was extinguished by the freakish gusts, although he appeared to shield carefully the timorous flame with his hand. This enabled him to stand still until Ned was once more forging ahead, when the genteel-looking man in citizen's dress again began to stroll along, swinging his cane and leisurely puffing his cigar. He needed its

solace, for a sharp nettling irritation was beginning to be very prominent in his consciousness. "I'd rather shadow a grasshopper than a boy," he said to himself, for there seemed to be some chance to restrain the mere activities of the one, and he could not be sure what the vagaries of the other implied. He prided himself on his experience. He had outwitted noted crooks in his time. He felt fully competent to divine any usual motive of flight or aggression or craft or wickedness, but the interest of standing still as Ned was now doing and kicking at a frog as it hopped from one side of the road to the other was something he could not appreciate. It seemed so casual, so inconsistent with any other motive than mere idle diversion, that he would have been minded to leave Ned in this choice batrachian company were he not lured on and on by the hope of finding the boy making an effort to communicate with the older and more important conspirators in the crime. The unique difficulties of the situation, too, appealed to his vanity in invention. What

to do while Ned was engaged with the frog he did not, for one moment, know. The next, with a sentiment of discovery, he drew out his watch, having observed a dial on the tower of a small building down a glade so steep that the clock was not many feet higher than his head as he stood on the hillside; he affected to compare the timepieces and then to reset his watch, and to wind it carefully anew. He had not completed this ruse, which he was exploiting in the most natural manner possible, when Ned suddenly started forward at a brisk pace and evidently with a definite goal in view.

The boy had all at once recognized the impulse in his mind to which he had been unconsciously tending. He desired counsel. His nature was frank, not secretive. He had only feared to divulge his knowledge of the crime lest a worse thing befall him, and he distrusted the people he knew, all more or less strangers to him and naturally devoid of any special interest in him or his welfare. When in the longing to open his heart he had

thought of his mother, the impulse was checked by the doubt of her capacity to cope with the situation. She was even more ignorant of the ways of this world than he himself, he argued, for he knew town life, while she, suspiciously restricting her intercourse even with her nearest neighbors, was hardly more sophisticated now than if she had never left her rural home in New Arcady, Kentucky, where she was born. Moreover she would scold, — alack, for poor femininity! She would ask him why he had done this, and why he had not done that, — all irrevocable, all a part of the immutable past, — and withal she would be as helpless as he himself to take up now the tangled present and unravel its tortuous coils. If only his father had lived! And so Ned suddenly bethought himself of certain of his father's old friends, — friends in the sense of patrons in that far-away country home he had left, — men whose horses he had shod, whose good opinion had been his meat and bread, whose relinquished favor he had always regretted, whose names and exploits

were forever on his lips to the day of his death. These were men of note in their section, of substance, of sophistication, of breeding. How often had Ned heard his father describe their genial traits, their lordly traditions, and liberal ways! Doubtless these portraits of the rural magnates were idealized under the softening touch of regretful memory and the roseate haze of distance, but Ned did not appreciate this. He only realized that they were of such station, character, and worldly knowledge as to render them above suspicion and eminently capable of advising him accurately as to his duty and danger in the matter. He thought they would believe his story; they would befriend him and protect him. And what so easy as to seek their advice and assistance! There in that deep cut lay the railroad, the parallel steel bars even now jangling faintly with the vibratory resonance of a far-off train. Should he leave at midnight after his work was over, he would be in that bucolic paradise at noon. Only a few hours' stay, and the night would bring

him back, and till all was over and explained, his mother might never know of his absence, being pacified with the subterfuge of a press of work at the printing-office.

It was a compact, resolute little shadow, stepping decisively and briskly along, that blurred and blotted out the dapplings of the chestnut and maple leaves, all fair and fresh and whole, which were imprinted by the sunshine in their graceful entirety on the smooth, broad, sandy stretch that led to the little station. The determination, though so suddenly taken, was definite in Ned's mind, and as he entered the building and walked over to the ticket-seller's window he had not a doubt as to his best course now. The man that the little aperture framed was blond, clean-shaven, young, with a steel blue eye and a cardigan jacket which he had donned to save the sleeves of the natty coat hanging on a hook beside his desk, and indeed the frayed sleeves of the jacket told of the wear and tear incident to driving a pen. He fixed upon Ned those matter of course, disconcerting eyes

peculiar to the human automaton, whose business it is to do the same mechanical thing a thousand times a day and to repeat the same mechanical words.

Ned demanded the price of a ticket, his little grimy paw already on his cheap buckskin wallet, hid away among less valuable stowage in the museum of his pockets.

"To New Arcady, Kentucky? Twelve dollars!" said the man. Ned felt his hair rise, — more than a month's wages! And was he to beg or beat his way back? The prospect in which he had begun to rejoice was dwindling, fading, vanishing like a mirage! And it had been so hopeful! He wondered, when he thought of this, might he not steal a ride thither, — beat his way! Nay, — had he not yet enough of beating his way?

"Want the ticket? Then move on," said the ticket agent as Ned still vaguely clung to the window, as if he thus kept a clutch on his ephemeral hope. He shook his head, unclasped his hand, and slipped away. "What

can I do for you, sir?" the agent asked sharply of a gentleman who was now standing silently at the window, seeming scarcely less dazed and wool-gathering than Ned had been. "Oh, time-table?" The automaton ungraciously flung it out, and went back to his writing with an air which seemed to ask if all the fools who wanted to go nowhere, and whom he wished were there, were coming this day to block up his window, and interrupt his work, and impede traffic.

Ned left the tall, thin gentleman in the station building engaged in the study of the time-table. But he did not long remain there. As the dejected little lad, who had not realized how he had been upborne by his secret hope of help and counsel from his father's old friends till it was snatched from him, took his way along the darkening shadowy paths, the tall man was once more swiftly afoot, and although he passed Ned and walked openly in advance he was determined no more to lose trace of the boy. The idea of quitting the city, which the inquiry at the

station had revealed, precipitated the necessity of prompt action. Very little more time could now be accorded to the line of investigation which the detective was pursuing, — the hope of discovering the boy in communication with the incendiaries. It would be necessary to arrest him forthwith, lest he escape from the town, and with him vanish the only clue as yet developed of the origin and perpetrators of the crime. Nevertheless the detective determined that he would still seek in this limited interval to secure some inkling, some vestige of a theory, that might lead to the unmasking of the principals in this nefarious affair. Thus he was acutely conscious of the patter of the small feet as they came nimbly along behind him; when at last they began to lag he turned from the road and sat down on a bench by the wayside, and there Ned noticed him for the first time since they had been in the park, and remembered when and where he had before seen him. Ned was relieved to observe as he passed that the man seemed to take no heed of him. He

did not even look up. Perhaps in his turn Ned would not have again thought of the stranger, so frequently encountered, had he not turned back as he reached the big iron gate to gaze regretfully over the great green stretch of the park. The man was just rising from the bench under the tree; he stretched his limbs with much deliberation, caught up his cane and came slowly down the broad walk toward the gate. He too was about to leave the place. Ned could not have said why, but he determined that he would not ride back to town in the same car. He loitered. There were two of the cable double-cars waiting on the track. The foremost was nearly full of passengers, — the other altogether empty.

"I 'll take the car that he leaves," Ned said to himself. Impressed with the idea that he was watched, he had half expected that the man would hesitate and wait for him.

To his surprise the stranger strode past without so much as a glance toward him and stepped upon the platform of the foremost car.

"I 'm the biggest fool in town!" thought

Ned in scorn for his terrors, turning nevertheless toward the other car.

"Go on!" said the grip-man of the empty cable car. "This car is going to turn in."

Ned went on, dismayed by the possibility that the man had noticed and understood this effort to avoid him, but when he too stepped upon the rear platform of the foremost car and the cumbrous vehicle started off, he saw that the man had bought the evening paper and was already deeply absorbed in its contents.

"He ain't even thinking about me," Ned reflected, much reassured. "He ain't even looked ter see if I took the kyar or no."

The boy who had sold the paper still stood in the doorway. He was a squabby little fellow of eight or ten, with carrot-tinted hair, a broad, dirty, freckled face, a wide mouth with several front teeth missing, a beguiling blue eye, and a persuasive lisp, although his voice was keyed to a blatant whine. He scanned the faces of the men in the car with a precocious attention and business tact at once ludi-

crous and pathetic as he recited the headlines of the news columns. There was something very appealing in his innocent and earnest eyes and long list of enormities.

"All about the bloody murder at the wharf!" he sang out suddenly.

There was no response. The car whizzed on. Nobody talked. There was not even smoking here, although from the "grip" visible ahead, the wind brought back the fragrance of cigars.

"Executhion at the Jail-yard! Two murdererth on the thame gallowth! Dying thpeech an' confethion! — Their neckth were broke!" he added suddenly, the last clause of his own motion and by way of explanation.

His air demanded, who could resist such fascinating reading as that! Still there was no response. That belled cat, the conductor, was taking the fares, and ever and anon the sharp tones of his bell-punch jangled on the air.

The disappointed little boy fetched a heavy sigh. He could remain on the car fare-free

as long as he was selling or seeking to sell his papers, but if merely in transit he must pay like other people. It was a long way back to the business portion of the town for those fat, short legs, which had already been abundantly exercised to-day, and the little boy racked his brains for more scareheads. Then with eternally springing hope he blurted out:

"All about the grave robbery! Goulth still at large."

He cocked his beguiling eye up at a gray-bearded gentleman distinguished by a mild, refined aspect and a clerical coat.

The old clergyman looked disgusted.

The boy had sold but one paper on this trip, and the car was already approaching the outskirts of the town. There was a tremulo in his voice which in any other person of his years, less hardy and self-reliant than a newsboy, would have preceded a burst of tears. With him it only preceded a shrill squawk:

"Gorham's theaytre burned,—latest detailth, total dethructhion!"

Ned winced. He thought of the fiery, im-

pulsive owner. How would he endure the loss, the humbled pride, the day of small things! With the weight of the recollection of his own wrong-doing Ned felt as if he were responsible for the moral ordeal as well as the material disaster — although he had no concern with either — which the manager seemed destined to encounter.

"Heavy Inthurance. New York Companies," the boy sang out unexpectedly.

Ned started as suddenly as if he had been shot.

"'Ere, boy," he said, fishing out of his pocket the change of the silver quarter which the "funny man" had bestowed upon him. "Gimme that paper."

The little fat boy in the door stared, his mouth open in astonishment and exhibiting the vacant spaces where his teeth ought to be. He had never known a small working boy such as Edward to buy a daily paper. He thought Ned was guying him until he took another look at the outstretched hand with the proffered nickel. Then he gravely handed

over the folded journal. The elderly gentleman of clerical aspect looked down at Ned with a smile; he saw in the occurrence only an amusing affectation of mannish tastes and habits. It had a far graver meaning to another person in the car, who was openly staring at Ned, with a new light kindling in his eyes and an expression of triumph in the curl of his lip.

Ned was cowering back, making a feint of opening the paper, and yet all a-quiver with the realization that he had betrayed himself. How could a poor boy, such as he was, be supposed to take an interest in Gorham's insurance? He feared his eagerness upon the mention of the subject might intimate to the man — if this were really a detective who had watched and followed him — that he possessed some knowledge of the fire, connected with the question of insurance. It might even imply the truth, — arson! Only he would be numbered with the incendiaries. He had given the detective the clue, — Insurance!

Ned presently made an effort to seem to

read the paper, — he could not pin his mind to a single syllable. It was scant comfort to him now — since he had given himself away — to know that the First Player and he must have overheard *only a part* of Gorham's conversation with his friend, and that in refusing to renew his policy in the Rising Phœnix Insurance Company because of a quarrel with the agent he had at once placed the risk elsewhere. Thus the burned theatre was amply insured in other companies, and Gorham's loss would be slight, comparatively speaking, by reason of the disaster.

The lamp had been lighted in the car, although it was not yet quite dark. Ned could see still as they whizzed along on some considerable elevation the wide spread of the city stretching in dusky undulations against the sky, which had now grown gray, portending rain. Beyond some dip, full of roofs, massive blocks of business houses rose, frowning and gloomy, while between surged smoke and dust in fantastic, haggard clouds that suggested witches and demons and undreamed-of

powers of the air. The mazes of the telegraph and telephone wires now and then became visible, meshed and webbed about the town as if it were caught and held fast in the toils of some big scientific spider. Oh, it was a dreary evening, — long did Ned remember it! Even the most commonplace things had strange and sinister effects. The air was pulsing with rhythmic vibrations; the earth throbbed tumultuously; from a square railed inclosure in the middle of the street a column of black smoke gushed suddenly forth as if spewed from the pits of hell, and a locomotive was shrieking like a demon as it rushed out from the long tunnel beneath the avenue where the cable car rolled heavily on and on, its gong clamoring at every intersecting street, and now and again in a tumult of jarring warning lest some enterprising vehicle usurp the track.

Once more Ned looked at the detective. The detective was looking at Ned. For that moment they understood each other.

But the sharp boy of a town is no match

for the sharp man of a town. The quiet personage in plain black clothes folded up his newspaper, put it in his breast pocket, then turning slightly in his seat, looked out of the window at the rows of decorous, even handsome residences which they were now passing. The gilded numbers were distinct upon the illuminated transoms, for within the gas was already lighted. He seemed to scan each with interest, as if he sought some particular number. Presently he rose, passed to the platform, quietly swung himself off, and walked slowly and meditatively to the sidewalk.

Ned sat amazed as the progress of the car soon left him behind. He began to think that he had been mistaken from the first, — that he had neither been watched nor followed. The man had looked attentively at him to be sure, — but what of that? The white-haired gentleman of clerical aspect had also looked at him with interest. Ned felt quite certain now that influenced by his own secret anxiety he had magnified the danger, and fancied suspicion in every casual careless

stranger. He was sure that he had encountered no detective.

Ned could not see through the buildings on either hand. He could not know that the few passers along a side street were staring in mild surprise at a grave, genteel-looking man, dressed in black, who was running at full speed as if for his life. When this man reached a broad avenue parallel to the one which he had quitted he did not slacken his pace, but plunged down another side street, then through an alley, and out once more upon a thoroughfare. There he hailed a passing car and sprang upon it. He had calculated time and distance very narrowly, for as the car made a broad curve, turning down a street at right angles with the avenue it had just traversed, it came upon the track close behind a car with a blue light, the one which he had left not five minutes earlier, which was still rolling down the street in a straight line.

As he looked through the window at the vehicle in advance his sharp eyes were quick to detect the slim little figure of the printer's

devil still sitting close to the door, and he felt that whether it were instinct which had warned the boy or inadvertence on his own part in bringing his surveillance too close, it had been cleverly counteracted.

CHAPTER VI

The detective pondered seriously upon all these things as he sat there. He wondered that as yet the boy should have done nothing to indicate his partners in a crime so far beyond his own scope. More than all, he wondered how the little printer's devil should know or care anything about the insurance of the theatre, and what the question of the insurance had to do with his surreptitious entrance and the theft of the diamonds and other portable valuables.

The fire had been at first supposed to be the result of accident or of carelessness on the part of the theatre's employees, until Peter Bateman's story had suggested to the police the possibility that theft had necessitated that sequence of pillage, which is incendiarism. Thus the detective had believed that the theatre had been robbed by some gang of

thieves, of whom Ned was but the humble tool, and then fired to conceal the traces of the more profitable crime. Now this conclusion was shaken, — and again and again he asked himself in perplexity and doubt what the question of the insurance could have had to do with the crime.

The more he thought of it the more he was convinced that this was to be a singular and difficult case. Properly worked up it would reflect much credit on the officer who should finally bring it to a successful issue. Once in the course of his varied speculations on the subject he came very close indeed to the truth; he canvassed the possibility that the theatre was burned from motives of malice or revenge, for Gorham was a man who made and kept bitter enemies. But the fact that any fool must know that so large and valuable a property was always amply insured would, he thought, prevent antagonism or reprisal from taking that form, since the loss would fall most heavily upon the various companies who had assumed the risk, — vague,

unimagined corporations, beyond the scope of malice or antagonism, foreign to the thought of an incendiary.

Still meditating aimlessly about the question of insurance, he began to wonder if Gorham were not actually a gainer rather than a loser by the fire. The theatre's furnishings were getting shabby and out of style; much of the scenery was old; the site had become, by reason of one of those swift expansions of the commercial section of the town, so common in our growing southwestern cities, more valuable by far than the building itself; the season had not been very prosperous, — too much legitimate drama to cope successfully with spectacular opposition. The smaller theatres drew the crowds, and light opera was the vogue. More than all, there was of record a rather heavy mortgage on the structure itself, which showed that the owner had needed money in considerable emergencies. Taken all in all, Gorham was doubtless in better financial case now, a richer man to-day than yesterday.

All at once the detective began to put two and two methodically together. Gorham, by reason of the heavy insurance, had profited by the burning of the theatre. The boy, who was known to have secretly entered the house, presumably for the purpose of theft, had unwittingly manifested a tumult of excited interest upon the sheer mention of the insurance of the building, — a matter usually absolutely alien to one of his age, his class, and his ignorance; when in a state of obviously alert suspicion he became aware that this incongruity had been observed, he grew so restive under surveillance, evidently recognizing its menace, that the officer, not wishing to make an arrest prematurely, was obliged to withdraw, and only shadow him from afar.

Insurance! Had the boy indeed done nothing to indicate the perpetrator of the crime!

The car was now passing the ruins of the theatre. The smoke, still curling slowly into the air, had a certain luminous quality, reflected from the dying embers. Red lanterns here and there marked the lines of the débris,

where the brick walls had fallen across the sidewalks and street, blocking the way, and served as a warning to the benighted passer-by. One of these lanterns cast a dull flush upon the gilded mask of Folly high on the frescoed wall, still grotesquely leering down upon the melancholy scene. As the lurid glare gradually faded in the distance, the detective, his conclusion reached at last, silently nodded his head, decisively, aggressively.

For this astute person had come to believe that Gorham had himself fired his own theatre!

He believed the boy, entering for the purpose of theft and concealed among the scenery, had accidentally gained a knowledge of the manager's crime, — else why should a lad of his years, a mere child, feel an interest in so remote a subject as the details of the insurance of the building? He doubtless went or was sent there with the object of stealing, nefarious enough! but burning the building could work an advantage to no one but the owner, who would get the big insurance money! Thus the detective deduced that

Gorham himself had committed the crime which in double-dealing, joining with the "star," the manager of the theatrical company, and the insurance companies, he now pretended to cause to be investigated by the police.

The detective's anxiety to discover the printer's devil in seeking to communicate with some criminal, some noted "crook," on the subject of the theatre, changed to an alert expectation. He believed the boy would seek to communicate with Gorham, — he would make use of his knowledge of the crime in an effort to extort money.

When Ned at last left the car the detective had become so cautious as to follow only at a very considerable distance, so extra-hazardous had his surveillance become, so alertly suspicious seemed the boy. Down and down Ned took his way, through streets that grew more dirty and dingily lighted as he went. The tall, gloomy tenement houses on either hand, for miles, it seemed, apparently leaned toward each other across the way, to limit

the sky and exclude the air from the sad purlieus below. Some women were quarreling in shrill, shrewish accents on a corner; one reeled as she walked, and hard by there was a saloon that exuded a dim glow of untrimmed kerosene lamps, a pervasive odor of beer and whiskey, and a series of dirty, frowzy customers of both sexes at all hours of the day and night. It had a more remote trade, too; now and then a child, tangle-haired, begrimed, unnaturally sharp of eye and tongue, yet still suggestive of that universal promise of youth, — dim, dim, not a possibility, hardly a dream, only intimating a higher purpose in its creation, — scuttled out with a pitcher of beer, bearing it carefully away to some drink-sodden wretch in a forlorn attic. The clouds had thickened; they seemed to Ned to-night, though never before, to resemble the clouds of sin and sorrow and suffering that hang over the homes of the wicked and weak, and to prefigure the bursting of the vials of wrath. And search the sky as he would, he could discern no star.

When he had toiled up four flights of a dark, rickety staircase, and opened a door in the rear of the mansard roof, the sudden contrast of the scene within smote upon his quivering nerves, his quickened perceptions, as if he had never before beheld it. The floor was scoured white, and throughout the atmosphere was the pungent aroma of coarse yellow soap. The clean patchwork quilts on the two beds were as gay with many colors as Joseph's coat. The monkey-stove sought to atone for its many misdeeds emblazoned on the smoke-blackened walls, and glowed to a scarlet hue, and upon it simmered the savory dish of onion stew that he loved. His sickly, puny little sister, seated on a home-woven rug in the centre of the floor, found plenteous entertainment in banging a tin cup with an iron spoon, while her mother was busied in the task of wrapping hundreds of bonbons in gayly fringed papers, for this work for the candy factory could be done at home, and the care of the child prevented her from going out to secure better paid work elsewhere.

"That child is the bane of yer life," her neighbors sometimes said, with a species of antagonism toward the hindrance, born, it seemed, only to be a clog and a dead-weight. "Ye had better sen' it to the 'sylum, or somewher's, an' git some use of yerself."

Ned's mother returned no comment, no reply, to these suggestions; sometimes it seemed as if she had some impediment in her speech, so silent she had become, so taciturn with her neighbors. The fact that she was country-bred was shown abundantly in her stolid uncommunicativeness, her vague terror of all the ways of the great city outside of these four walls, her old-fashioned code of manners and morals, and the painfully wrought and maintained cleanliness of her surroundings. No slight task it was, to be sure, to "pack" the water which plentifully drenched floors, tables, pots, kettles, windows, up four flights of steep stairs from the hydrant in the yard! Small wonder that poverty and dirt are so often concomitant. It had been an evil day for her and her simple, untutored

husband when some vague, distorted ambition had moved him to despise the small havings of a country-side blacksmith and seek to become a "horse-shoer" among the often mythical advantages of a large town. He had little of the canny thrift characteristic of his Scotch nationality. He was an open-handed, jovial, florid, red-haired, fiery-tempered man, — over sanguine and credulous. The many deceptions practiced upon greenhorns, the greater expense of living, the fierce competition of an already crowded trade, baffled and bewildered the sturdy fellow. He worked as long as he had work, but when he was idle he began to drink more and more, and perhaps at last it was no great misfortune to his family when one of the pestilences which decimate the tenement region laid this once fair stalk of wheat low with the "cheat." He left his wife, Ned, and the puny, sickly little girl as remote, as alien from their old, country home, as if that haven of humble, hearty comfort were in a foreign planet. They lived as best they might on the boy's wages and the few

jobs of coarse washing that she could get to do at home. It was the pride of both mother and son that they had maintained this precarious existence on these slender means now for more than a year, and in this fact they saw a glad augury for the future.

Her face always wore, however, an apprehensive, appealing expression, although Ned remembered when it had been otherwise. As she turned it toward him now all her perseverance, her self-sacrifice, her deprivations, her honest, persistent uprightness, her mingled fears and faith in some fair future for him touched his heart with a potent force. He cast but one glance at her and burst instantly into tears.

"What ails ye, sonny?" she asked soothingly, and with an intonation that promised partisanship, earnest and loving; for sometimes he came home with great griefs of editorial tyranny, or fault-finding and injustice in the composing-rooms, or the guying of some facetiously disposed junior reporter, or in a revolt of indignation against the pressure

of new and severe regulations — when his partisan mother would straightway vilify his enemies (for the nonce), till he would be sorry for them and rouse himself to protest and remonstrate in their defense.

But now Ned shook his head and would say nothing.

His silence evidently alarmed her. She perceived that his trouble was far more serious than the usual misadventures in the day's work. Once or twice she urged him to speak, but in vain. She looked at him apprehensively for a moment longer, and not without anger. Then as if appreciating the futility of remonstrance, she turned away to the table, took up a flaunting red and gilded paper, and with mechanical swiftness and dexterity twisted the fringed ends.

"Boys are hard to know how to deal with," she remarked. "They can't l'arn no sense, and they ain't got no instinct. A boy ought ter know by nature that he hev got two friends what can't wish him nothing but well. One is his God in Heaven, and the t'other is

his mother on earth, — and them is the ones he trusts the least an' trusts the last."

"The harm is done now," sobbed Ned.

"Undo it, then," said his mother sternly.

Ned walked to the window, and heavily leaning against the sill, looked out at the gloomy night. When he had first lost the fear that he had been "spotted" by the detective he had felt almost glad of the discovery that the insurance companies only would sustain the loss by the fire, for these, being corporations vague to his mind, impersonal, of presumably illimitable wealth, did not appeal very strongly to his limited experience for sympathy. He was glad that the manager whom he had defrauded would not suffer from the villainy he had witnessed. This feeling had served in some sort to blunt his conscience and numb his sense of his own wrongdoing. Now, however, among the familiar surroundings of home, — sacred as an altar, a temple, even though only an attic in the tenement district, — he regained his normal poise; he realized how his mother would

regard it. He winced from the sheer recollection of the old-fashioned phrase with which she was wont to characterize such shifty dealings. "Stealin', an' nothin' shorter!" It was indeed theft. She would think that he had stolen the price of admission to the theatre as absolutely as if he had picked Manager Gorham's pocket. What did it matter to him whose was the loss in the burning of the beautiful theatre! The fact remained. He was a thief.

The aspect of dishonesty had never been so odious to him as now. Hitherto he had carried his mother's teaching in one hand and his trusty conscience in the other, and with a fair accord between them he had gone triumphantly through the multiform temptations which assail a small boy struggling for a living amidst the turmoils of a great town. Now it was all over. He could never again feel aught but contempt for himself. In his poignant pang of despair he had a strong impulse to confess to his mother. He glanced over his shoulder at her, but she had gone

back wearily but unfalteringly to her work, and he relapsed once more to staring dismally out over the roofs about him, mostly on a lower level than the windows of this "sky parlor."

Scores of chimney-pots loomed up close at hand. Despite their smoky, gloomy, unsocial aspect, this insensate crew served in some sort as company for the boy. They were always there, — they saw him depart in the morning, they waited for him to come home at night. They had stories to tell him. He loved a vague, fanciful sense of community interests with the unknown firesides below them. He pictured to himself the families clustered about these invisible hearths. Every fantastic wreath of soot-bespangled smoke curling out from these grimy tubes indited for him an idyl on the fair page of the sky. What tragic, or poetic, or romantic episodes were kindled with the homely fires cooking the supper — and ended in smoke!

When winds were abroad and went rioting about the chimney-pots, whistling and singing,

the smoke affected too a jovial mien, and came rushing and rollicking up to join its boisterous playfellows, who now would sweep vast clouds of it aside in tenuous dispersal in the air, and now would roll up great curling lengths of it like so many yards of dusky ribbon, tucking it back into the chimney-pots whence it had sought to issue forth. What roaring farces in the house-top regions these wild days! What sense of hilarity, of joyous motion, of jocund voice! "Ha! ha! ha!" said the winds. "What a high old time!"

Whenever the moon was up, weird, dark shadows would haunt the chimney-pots, and go skulking slyly over the roofs, and Ned's imagination would conjure into the air beings far more strange than his simple mythical friends whom he had placed in order about their unknown hearths below. If it were in the glad summer-time these gruesome shapes would so far abandon their port of terror as to dance with the misty images of the smoke to the music of a brass band, which played in

a city square, distant indeed, but not altogether out of earshot. In the winter the snow-covered roofs reflected the silvery lunar sheen and shimmered. The chimney-pots were often begirt with zones of icicles. Grotesque gargoyles of frozen slush and sleet blocked the water-spouts and hung far over the eaves. A star with a chill crystalline palpitation would look down. Far, far away the deep, mellow tones of the cathedral bells would ring out the Angelus. And winter or summer he loved it all, for his heart was light, his conscience clear, and this was Home!

But now the atmosphere was murky; the clouds were low; the swift gleams of lightning were beginning to quiver among the chimney-pots, that seemed in the uncertain fluctuations to move, to wince, to start aside, to draw back as in fright. Suddenly resonant torrents were beating upon the roof; the tin gutters clamored; the mutterings of thunder swelled to sonorous emphasis.

Ned felt all at once refreshed, elated, — a sense often induced by a rain-fall long

delayed. Perhaps the interval of rest had calmed his nerves, and had restored his jaded faculties. A new idea suddenly sprang into his mind.

He did not hesitate; he turned briskly, got down from a shelf an ink-bottle, — nearly empty from evaporation rather than exhausted by service, — tore a blank page from an old copy-book which he had used in his short attendance at the public school, and proceeded at once to indite some straggling characters. He had addressed an envelope before he looked up at his mother, who was silently watching him.

"I want some money out o' my wages," he said stoutly, assuming an air as of a moneyed man who demands what is his own by rights. Then, "Tain't fur no harm," he added reassuringly.

He had feared her questions, which he was resolved he would not answer. Without a word, however, she pointed at the drawer of the table. If he would not voluntarily give her his confidence she would not attempt to

coerce it. She did not even ask nor look to see what sum he took.

The envelope was sealed, and presently Ned was flying along through street after street with the rain pelting in his face and the wind bantering him for the loan of his hat. He did not care! His heart was so much lighter! He saw from afar the great red and blue bottles in the illuminated windows of a drug-store, and here he paused and went within and with much circumspection bought a postage-stamp; then he plunged out in the rain again, making straight for a certain box under a gleaming lamp in the distance that sent its quivering shafts of light far through the gloom.

He brought up under the lamp-post, agitated, anxious, but still unswerving. He looked about him expectantly, watchfully, — it might have seemed even fearfully to one noting his attitude from a distance. But he had no longer any fear. The moment was fraught with peculiar importance to him. He had posted many letters for employers, but

never one for himself, and never before nor after one like this. A man beyond the furthest limits of the lamp's aureola of misty light had paused too, breathing hard. He was not used to running so far nor running so fast. He thought the boy's look and attitude very suspicious, as Ned, realizing the supreme significance of the moment and the value of this letter to him, slowly and solemnly dropped it into the box, and then swiftly scudded off down the street.

When the letter-carrier next came to this box the detective was lurking in its vicinity. He whispered a request and mentioned a name, but the postman shook his head with all the dignity of one invested with a little brief authority, and it seemed that "the regulations" were the only words his tongue would deign to frame. "Why, what harm can it do to let me see the outside of the letters?" insisted the detective plausibly. The postman's head wagged to and fro more slowly under the well applied force of argument.

"The handwriting on the outside of the

envelope alone will tell me all that I want to know; it is a very important crime which I am investigating."

The postman's head ceased to vibrate. Yet he was slow and thoughtful as he laid his hand on the box. As the detective waited eagerly for it to be opened he looked rather like a fox, — so keen, and so crafty, and so alertly expectant. The letters, as they were slowly shuffled before his eyes, he perceived belonged unmistakably to commercial correspondence, — neat, compact, evidently the work of practiced scribes, — except only one; this was blurred and smirched, with a crumpled envelope and a wildly diagonal address, which moreover was grievously misspelled. He stared with breathless interest and curiosity at the scrawling characters: —

Manger A. J. Gorm
Manger Gorm's Theter.

In less than half an hour the detective was in close conference with his chief. "That is all," he said, concluding his account of these

incidents. "I think I have caught the boy communicating with the criminal. The criminal is the owner himself, — and that letter in my opinion is the boy's attempt to extort money from Gorham by threatening to blab all he knows."

CHAPTER VII

THERE was a strange procession in the streets early in the morning. Its line of march lay through the principal business quarters of the city, and everywhere its advent was greeted with wild hurrahs. In fact it did much of its own cheering. The enthusiasm for itself which pervaded its ranks was of a gratifying fervor. It was kindly esteemed, too, by others. Very seldom do the solid business men of a city look upon a procession of strikers — for these were strikers — with the benign indulgence accorded this noisy crew. And very seldom do respectable citizens of any town appear in such dingy boots as those which covered the feet of some genteel people.

For this was a procession of striking bootblacks and newsboys, and for a time the sun had a corner on "shining."

Banners fluttered to the breeze; quaint standards were held aloft. One bore this strange device, "BLOOD OR PIE," and elicited a peal of laughter whenever it came around a corner.

As far as the interests of their trades were concerned the strikers might have forgotten their grand display within a week, for they were soon underbidding each other, and the price of a "shine" had fallen to the old familiar nickel before the sun was fairly through his job that day.

But they long remembered, perhaps for years, the electric thrill that quivered through the ranks of the procession when a well-known police officer signaled to the vanguard to halt. The boys brought up suddenly, surprised and perhaps a little frightened.

The officer strode up and tapped Ned on the shoulder. Though neither bootblack nor newsboy, Ned was a friend of the strikers. He was a public character among his fellows, and the ruling spirit of this demonstration, which had been long in preparation. He had

stood at the head of the column without a qualm, for he had felt in clearing his conscience last night as if he had cleared off all old scores.

Nobody so astonished now as Ned!

"What fur?" he gasped. The officer lifted the warrant slightly out of his breast pocket, and pointing his big thumb toward it replied succinctly, —

"Housebreaking, larceny, and arson."

"My eye!" exclaimed a little newsboy, concentrating an amazed stare upon the diminutive alleged housebreaker, thief, and incendiary.

Ned's heart sank, — all his forebodings realized, — all his scheming in vain! He had much ado to keep from bursting into tears. Yet he was helplessly wondering how they had come to suspect him of knowing aught of the burning of the theatre or the theft of the money and diamonds, when he had so persistently kept his own counsel.

The officer would tell nothing as he hurried the boy along. The gaping procession

followed, still mechanically bearing aloft the banners which Ned's own ingenuity had devised and constructed.

"Ye 'll find out soon enough," was all his laconic captor would say.

Ned found out only when the warrant was read and Peter Bateman was testifying before the magistrate.

The fat boy's cheeks were flabby and white. A cold perspiration glistened in his hair, which stood up straight and stubbly above his forehead. His eyes seemed very close together indeed. He was greatly frightened and agitated, and the magistrate, who had a keener discrimination of the merits of a good dinner than of the various phases of human nature, encouraged him, and spoke kindly to him whenever he faltered. He seemed very reluctant to give his testimony, and the justice accounted this aversion to accuse his friend a fine trait of character, and regarded Pete yet more favorably.

Pete cast but one glance at Ned. He withdrew his eyes hastily and kept them fixed

appealingly on the justice's face. He told his story glibly enough when once fairly at it, for he had spent the interval since he was last before the magistrate in reciting it again and again to himself, that he might not let it vary with the sworn statement which he had previously made.

"I ain't goin' ter git busted now fur perjury — sure pop," he said to himself.

Even in its midst he was wondering how he could tell it at all with the consciousness of Ned's fiery eyes fixed upon him. It would be too much to say that he had no remorse. He did wish that Ned could know that he had not intended to bring affairs to this pass, — that he had only lied, as boys often lie, for petty spite, and had never imagined the far-reaching consequences that had ensued. If Pete had been a receptive subject for a moral lesson he might now have learned what a terrible engine for evil even a diminutive lie can be. But he was only asking himself how could he be expected to foresee such a coincidence as the probable pillage of the

theatre, supplemented by the burning of the building.

Still, the realization of all the evil he had wrought came upon him with such crushing force at the end of his story that he burst into tears and convulsive sobs and presented quite an edifying spectacle of sympathizing and grieving friendship.

"Well, — well," said the acute magistrate soothingly, "you have done the best you could, — you are a good boy."

"He 's a liar!" Ned flamed out suddenly. "A liar! A liar!"

The next moment Ned saw that this outburst of wrath had done him harm. It seemed that only a turbulent and vicious character would thus meet reluctant accusation with vociferous abuse. The justice coldly and sternly ordered him to be silent. The spectators looked askance at him. Earlier they had not been without sympathy and a hopeful expectation that the boy could show his innocence. At the outset, when informed by the magistrate of his right to counsel at every

stage of the proceedings, Ned's prompt refusal to send for a lawyer won him favor, as it indicated an evident belief that his innocence could be easily established without aid. His vehement negative raised a laugh, however, at the expense of the profession, for it was Ned's conviction that lawyers are a pragmatical, exacting tribe, and far more likely to complicate matters than to simplify them.

There was a stir of uncertainty and curiosity when the magistrate asked the little defendant if he wished to make any statement concerning the circumstances in the case and in contradiction of the testimony given against him, informing him at the same time that he could waive making such a statement at present, and that such waiver could not be used against him either now or afterward at his trial. It seemed in evident expectation of an immediate discharge that Ned declined to avail himself of this opportunity to postpone the issue and prepare for it.

In fact he believed he could dissipate the unfortunate impressions which he had created

by telling a plain, straightforward story about the scheme to see the play, and what was said by Pete in his fantastic threats while at the window.

"I can tell you all about it in three minutes 'thout no lawyer," he declared, and forthwith plunged tumultuously into the narration.

At this moment a little judicious kindness might have elicited all that the boy had seen and heard. The justice, however, did not encourage him as he had encouraged Pete. He seemed inimical and severe, and when Ned hesitated in small matters glanced at him sharply. He evidently regarded Ned as a case of precocious hoodlum. Once more the frightened boy thought his safety lay in silence. He was only suspected as yet, he argued within himself. Nothing could be proved against him except that he got into the building at the window. He knew that in several of the States boys no older than he was had been convicted of felonies and sentenced to the penitentiary. Therefore he feared that his own extreme youth would be

regarded as a very slight palliation of the crime of which he stood accused, and that he might be locking the doors of the State prison upon himself for a long term if he should tell all and his story be disbelieved or misinterpreted.

Instead of the firm, coherent detail of the facts exactly as they had happened, with which he had been proceeding, he began, as these thoughts surged through his mind, to stumble, — to repeat his words, to fall on long, reflective pauses; and finally he ceased abruptly in the middle of a sentence.

The magistrate had occasionally looked up impatiently; he elevated his eyebrows, pursed his lips inquiringly, and now laid down his pen outright.

"Is that all?" he said.

"Naw, sir," Ned admitted, in grievous agitation.

Perhaps his youth and his hard straits and the terrible future which seemed impending over him touched the justice. He gave a little line. He felt that he hardly exceeded

the intention of the restrictions of his office in prompting the defendant, helping him out, in view of his youth, inexperience, and friendlessness, — giving him a chance to tell his story and establish, if it might, his innocence.

"Do you want to tell how you saw the play?"

"Yes, sir," said Ned, plucking up heart of grace.

"And how you got out?"

"Got out of the window wher' I got in."

"Do you want to tell why you did not go out at the back door?"

"Did n't know wher' 't wuz," replied Ned.

All these facts were being incorporated in the written statement of Ned's own account of himself, which when finished would be read to him, and which he might sign or not, as he would, but the magistrate would annex the reason for no signature in case he should refuse. It was beginning to take a definite value, and the two returned to this unique method of getting at the facts with renewing spirit. Alas for the next question!

"Do you want to tell why you did not follow the employees to the back door?"

Ned did not answer. His face fell.

The justice looked surprised and disappointed. He returned to the effort.

"You were afraid of being seen by some of them? Was that the reason you did not follow them?"

Ned still was silent.

The justice was obviously ill at ease. He had ventured upon an innovation in a very important matter, which he felt was unjustifiable unless some valuable result were to accrue. There was something singular in the case, and he had his qualms in committing the boy to jail without a fair opportunity to show his innocence. For this he had already gone far. The fact would not be mended nor marred by going further.

"Did you leave any one in the theatre?" he queried.

"Yes, sir," faltered Ned.

"How many did you leave there?" demanded the magistrate briskly, seeing the

possibility of shifting the crime from such narrow shoulders.

"Three men." (General sensation.)

"Give their names," said the magistrate, fingering his pen and feeling his hand upon the heart of the mystery.

"Dunno their names."

"But you could identify them?"

To his great displeasure Ned would not answer. The magistrate persisted. "Did you want to describe them? Was that your intention?"

Still Ned refused to speak.

The justice looked at him, baffled. There were few persons present, and most of them the miniature strikers. But he discerned in the countenances of the officers and a lawyer or two, besides those representing the prosecutors, an alert appreciation of his departure from the methods of his office and the letter of the law.

"Come, come, now, — what were they doing?"

Ned looked down at his convulsively work-

ing hands and said nothing, — knowing not what to say and what to leave unsaid.

"What o'clock was it when you left?" The magistrate essayed as he supposed an easy inquiry. He wished not to have it said that with an unprecedented course of questioning he had reduced the prisoner to silence when the law expressly provides what shall be asked of him, and that with his consent, by the examining magistrate. He could not conceive that the interrogation as to the hour when one quitted a theatre could prove an embarrassment. It failed, however, to reopen verbal communication. Ned heard again far away that tolling bell of the night strike the mystic note of one o'clock, the single weighty tone, impressive, awe-inspiring, with the recollection of the darkness and the strangeness of his awakening.

Once more he said nothing.

The justice at last desisted in irritation. He had not acquitted himself to his satisfaction, and he began to be more acutely ill at ease as he noted two or three newspaper reporters in the room, who had been attracted

by the rumor of unusual circumstances in the examination which had already gotten wind. One of the reporters suddenly addressed the magistrate, and to Ned's surprise and his deep mortification he recognized a representative of the paper which he also served in his humble capacity.

"May it please your honor," said the reporter courteously, "I know the defendant very well, and can testify to his general good character."

The justice, thoroughly out of temper, replied testily, "To please me you would have to testify to a good deal more than that."

"I thought from your manner that you would be glad to be able to avoid committing so young a lad." The reporter sought to justify himself.

Now this comment upon the course which the justice had seen fit to take, since he himself did not altogether approve it, was the most unfortunate that could have been made in Ned's interest. That it was disapproved by the detective, the officers, and the lawyers

of the parties who were grievous sufferers by the crime in which Ned had contrived to become entangled and who naturally, from the magnitude of the losses, were not disposed to leniency, was most obvious from their general facial expression, although no overt indication of dissatisfaction had been adventured.

"Fortunately *you* are not here to *think!*" retorted the justice. His large head, with its fat jowl, was canted slightly backward as he spoke, his hands were lightly clasped across his capacious stomach, and he looked at the reporter from under the half-closed lids of small, narrow, unfriendly eyes.

The reporter was of a type of man calculated to be particularly unacceptable to the burly demagogue of a justice. The blond, handsome youngster was something of a fop. Indeed, he went by the sobriquet of "dude reporter" in the composing-room. He was nevertheless a very efficient newspaper man, he came of good people, he was essentially a gentleman, and he was of a specially kind and amiable disposition. He could no more have

refrained from seeking to help Ned at this pinch than if the boy were drowning before his eyes. He had been silent at first, although he stared as if he thought he had the nightmare when the spectacle of the forlorn little printer's devil in custody broke upon his astonished gaze. He had, however, waited to interfere till the moment when the justice's decision seemed imminent, hoping that Ned had some ground of defense, some testimony to offer that would serve to extricate him. Now he could wait no longer, and he braved the wrath of the justice, and, what was much more formidable to him, the gleeful relish of two reporters from other papers, who were even now writing him up before his eyes as fast as their waggish pencils could travel.

"Ned!" he cried indignantly, "why don't you answer his honor? You know that you *can't* be guilty of all those crimes. Tell him about the affair!"

The justice was for a moment as one petrified. Then he rallied his faculties. "Young man," he said menacingly, "do you know where you are?"

One of the gayly facetious reporters added "at" to the sentence, and thus it stood in the printed columns in the morning.

"I beg your honor's pardon," said the dude reporter humbly, "but noting your honor's kind efforts to make the child divulge the names of the wicked men who may be utilizing his youth and ignorance to conceal their crimes of larceny and arson, I ventured to speak to him. He knows me very well, and I thought I might aid your honor by reason of my long acquaintance with him. He is a very good boy" —

"Must be," interrupted the justice sarcastically, — "not at all obstinate."

— "and greatly valued by his employers. I felt that you would like that any one who could should testify in his behalf."

"If you have anything specific to say on that head you may speak, — that is, if he will permit you, — you see that he has no counsel; otherwise it is not worth while to administer the oath."

The dude reporter reflected doubtfully, all

unmindful of the flying pencils of the other reporters "scooping" him on the spot. But when he came to consider his knowledge of Ned he was compelled to perceive that it was in the nature of things negative and trivial, and would do more harm adduced than neglected. Of what avail to detail the puerile little incidents of which such a boy's life was made up? When Ned fell into disgrace because the office cat was reduced to misery and despair by reason of a tin can tied to its tail, it required no great knowledge of character to discover that this was the joyous work of a certain roguish office-boy, and to relieve Ned of suspicion, which only fell upon him because he was the younger of the two. Ned dined with this cat daily, dividing with it the meagre contents of the little tin pail which he brought from home. He went about much of the time with the cat in his arms, although scornfully admonished to "Hush-a-bye your baby!" by this office-boy, who could be mocking as well as roguish. The too dainty staff, as Ned considered them, were often scandal-

ized by the cat's appearance in triumph, bearing a big, live rat through the editorial rooms, and not to be diverted from a tour of the place till the devil could be found, and the notable capture exhibited to its human friend. Ned seemed to delight in little services of utility, offered gratuitously and evidently with no expectation of reward; but this only proved the kindness of heart of this gentle little devil, and as the reporter racked his brains he realized that many of the facts possible to cite in his favor were only of this nature. Ned would see to it that a great array of pencils well sharpened were laid ready for use on each desk before the editorial work commenced daily, although this was none of his duty, more properly falling within the functions of the negligent office-boys. The night editor, the proud possessor of a spherical pincushion fashioned by an ingenious female relative, on frugal holiday gifts intent, was helplessly wont to see it roll its rotundities out of reach whenever needed, followed by reluctant feet and hearty maledictions, till

he found it one day secured against the wall by a wire ingeniously wrought basket-wise, effectually restraining its activities thereafter. Another editorial pincushion was of a dark hue, on a dusky desk, in a dim corner, often secluded altogether from discovery till it was rendered easily visible to the naked eye in any weather by a neatly adjusted frill of white tissue paper fashioned by the deft fingers of the devil, and daily renewed. The boy never forgot anything that might serve the comfort of others, slight though were his powers to promote this. The door of the editorial room had creaked from time immemorial till Ned and a drop of oil came. If a budget of papers was forgotten and left at home, if a personal errand was to be swiftly done, and the leaden-footed office-boys recoiled and protested against it as impracticable and contended that they were hired for no such miracles of speed, "Lemme go fur 'em," Ned would beg; "I 'll git 'em as soon as the printers let me off!" To be sure Ned had his trifling rewards, his favors being duly recipro-

cated in the way of small change, but these tokens were obviously unexpected, the simple little boy regarding them rather as free-will gratuities, mere gifts from sheer kindness, than as payment for services. No wonder the dude reporter was willing to exert himself. But how could he urge these trifling indicia of temperament and character, albeit Ned's opportunities were commensurately small? The reporter hesitated, and the sarcastic justice remarked at last, "May I remind your wisdom that the court awaits your pleasure?"

The blond young man — the very wave of his dainty cow-lick on his handsome forehead was an offense to the bluff justice — flushed, but replied with good temper, —

"Your honor knows that in the nature of things but little can be said for a mere child, whose opportunities for wrong-doing are limited as well as" —

"Perhaps not so limited as one might well think!" the magistrate interposed significantly.

"He has no position of trust, of course, but he has been faithful over the few things in his care. I know the boy to be greatly esteemed by his employers, — hard-working, punctual, careful, honest so far as I have ever heard or observed, eager to please, industrious, cheerful, willing, the most kindly disposed little fellow I ever saw in my life."

The justice rapped impatiently on his desk. "*This* is not to the purpose," he said. "Will you give bail for him?"

"In ignorance of the circumstances of the crime? — no, your honor, I will not."

"Will the paper go on his bail-bond?"

"*I* cannot speak for the management, naturally."

The justice, with the air of a man whose time has been unwarrantably wasted, turned back to the defendant. He inquired of Ned in curt accents if he could find bail, evidently expecting the negative answer which he received. In view of the testimony against him and the prisoner's own statement the justice declared that it was impossible to consider his

release. There was anger in the magistrate's eye and impatience in the bang of his blotting-pad as he signed the "mittimus" commanding the officer who had made the arrest to deliver the prisoner to the jailer of the county.

There the printer's devil was to await his trial at the next term of the criminal court; and Peter Bateman, when duly arraigned among the "drunk-and-disorderlies" in the police court, escaped with a reprimand because of his youth and the fact of a first offense, and was discharged and at liberty once more.

When the door of Ned's cell fairly closed upon him he could do nothing but throw himself on the floor in a frenzy of weeping. For a time he could think only of the disgrace, — the shame to himself and to his mother. Presently ideas more practical, more immediate in their effects, usurped this sentiment. He remembered her desolation, — her destitution. His wages would be lost to the little family while he was locked up here, — for how long, — oh, for how long! If they

would only let him work, — on his wages had he and his mother lived, — if they only would let him work for his mother, he would care for nothing besides. He broke once more into loud cries and sobs. How could the little household live without him and his weekly wage! They would starve — they would die! He beat as frantically as futilely on the door. He tried the strong bars at the window till every muscle in his arms ached.

When exhaustion brought calmness at last, he sat down and tried to think quietly of what could be done. He entertained now no intention of appealing to his father's old patrons to whom he had contemplated applying for counsel, for guidance, in a difficult emergency. Now, as he was tarnished by an actual criminal charge, he knew they would look askance upon him. He was aware that his mother had never, in her most stringent financial needs, considered seeking for help or charity from them, and hence he judged the tie was not of a kind that might justify money aid. His father's name, for old sake's sake,

Ned had fancied might warrant an appeal for advice, but he knew it would be futile as an urgency to them to risk money or to go upon his bond, and naturally so! If those who were acquainted with him personally could not venture thus, how could he expect it from strangers in effect, who had known his father indeed, but in humble guise and long ago, and whose attention could be brought now to Ned himself, only as a most precocious suspect of crime? He did not blame even the dude reporter for declining, but was grateful to him for the good word he had taken the trouble to say.

Ned's mind soon left the details of the future. Try as he might, it would not go forward. It would only travel over and over again the familiar ground of the singular events at the theatre and the detective's story in the magistrate's court to-day. Ned gave, however, no special heed to the episode, as recounted, of mailing the letter; that only proved to him that he was watched then, and now he knew that he had been watched all

day. He had no idea that the letter was of any particular importance to the police. The detective had included its mention in his testimony for purposes of his own. He did not disclose the fact that he had ascertained to whom it was addressed. He only wished to discover by the expression of the boy's face whether Ned attached any significance to a possible disclosure of this correspondence; but there was no added shade of fear or anxiety upon it, and the wily detective was for the nonce baffled.

CHAPTER VIII

The letter continued to be an interesting subject of speculation to the detective. His theory that Gorham had burned his own theatre, and that the boy, being a party to the crime or having knowledge of it, was seeking to extort money, had taken a strong hold upon him. He was determined to discover the contents of that letter.

Of course no one as yet except the chief of police knew that suspicions of Mr. Gorham were entertained. As the manager was a man of wealth and, in that sense, of influence and position, it was necessary to observe great caution in proceeding. The merest whisper of such suspicion would offer deadly offense to Gorham if he were innocent, and doubtless would entail consequences yet more serious to any speculator on the subject. If on the contrary he were guilty, it would be wise not to

give him the alarm prematurely. Therefore very quietly and furtively did the detective address himself to the duty of investigating Gorham.

In common with most people connected with the theatre, Mr. Gorham was a late riser. These important events of the morning had happened before he was up. They had served to wake him earlier than usual. He had been informed of the suspicions against Ned, and being notified of his subsequent arrest, at once telephoned a lawyer and was thus present by his counsel at the examination.

The detective had become acquainted with some of his habits, and had learned that his letters, which before the fire were sent to his office at the theatre, were now left by his orders at the hotel where he lived. His business of late years had not been altogether satisfactory or successful, and he probably did not yearn for the contents of his letters as appetizers; he was wont to lay them aside unopened until breakfast was concluded.

The obliging waiter who served him at

table had to this extent given him away, for and in consideration of a quarter of a dollar to him in hand paid by the detective. The attendant, however, mistook the officer for a creditor or a subscription agent merely, who wished to seize the manager at an auspicious moment when he might be made to pay up or subscribe or do something equally desperate.

The detective, the wily fox, had determined to be with Gorham at the instant when he should open Ned's letter.

"I 'll ask to be allowed to read the letter, and I 'll see how he takes that," thought the detective.

He contrived to meet Gorham in the corridor of the hotel just when he had finished his breakfast, and at once addressed him on the pretext of reporting the details of the investigation of the burning of the theatre, which the manager had joined the other sufferers by the fire in instituting, and the "shadowing" of the boy whom Pete had accused of entering the building with the avowed purpose of theft.

They walked while talking to the door of the hotel; and standing on the broad stone steps outside, Gorham paused to light his cigar. He listened to the particulars of the capture of the boy and the scenes in the committing magistrate's court without a show of feeling of any sort while he puffed his cigar into a glow. Then he threw the blazing match aside, thrust both hands into his pockets, and stared fixedly at the big, velvety red leaves of a hanging basket in a window hard by. His whole aspect was calculated to intimate to the detective that the recital was wearisome to the last degree and it would be well to have done with it.

How the wily fox watched him!

"He wrote a letter last night, — the boy did," the detective said slowly.

Gorham still stared absently at the great red, velvety leaves. He was satisfied with the amount for which the property was insured; he was busy with his plans for the future; he was already tired of the subject of the fire; he believed it the result of an accident or

the carelessness of the night watchman. This official had testified at the trial that morning that an acquaintance, a minor employee of the theatre, a scene-shifter, passing on the street late in the night, had paused on the corner for a casual friendly word; he had been seized with the conviction that he smelled fire, and then opining that it issued from the basement of the theatre, he had accompanied the night watchman thither, and they were turning over the varied assortments in the property-room and hunting among the tangles of ropes and lifts and stage machinery, and examining the furnace-room and pervading the place while the house was actually in flames above their heads. The scene-shifter, too, had given testimony to the same effect. In this connection Gorham was recollecting the difficulty which he had experienced, in common with every householder perhaps, in forcing employees of whatever sort to observe even a minimum of caution in dealing with fire and lights. He thought the police were on a false scent and were magnifying the clue

of the chance entrance of the boy — a child's device to steal a sight at a "show" — into a complicity with house-breakers and thieves and incendiaries.

The street was unusually quiet at this moment. Then a great transfer rattled by, its jarring turbulence filling the sunshine that blazed beyond the scalloped shadow of the awning, and calling up a hollow, tremulous echo from a cave which it was said lay under the town. What strange, high-colored dreams of the outside world must these prosaic vibrations take quivering into the darkened existence of the troglodytes — if any such mystic cave-dwellers could be here! What shadowy, picturesque fancies the echo led coyly out in the sunshine! The manager took his cigar from his lips and gazed pensively into the air. He had been thinking of trying the "spectacular" in a certain sort and on a grand scale when he should rebuild. Here was an idea, — some fantastic play, an opera perhaps, light but romantic, which should call for caverns, gnomes, grotesque conceits,

subterranean splendors — all wrought with the newest mechanical contrivances and electric effects. He was trying to recall some story, some old romance, some half-forgotten heroic poem which would lend itself to these modern facilities of representation.

He would not have believed then that he was never to rebuild his theatre, — that in less than an hour the thought would be odious to him.

He was paying scant heed to the detective's words. The officer could but see that fact. The boy might burden the postal service with his missives for aught that Gorham cared. "Or else," thought the man of suspicion, "he is very cleverly pretending indifference."

"The letter was addressed to you," said the detective suddenly.

There was an abrupt change of manner.

"To me!" exclaimed Gorham sharply.

He thrust his cigar between his teeth and with a hasty gesture drew from his breast pocket the budget of letters which he had placed there unopened.

He instantly distinguished the aspect of Ned's letter from the others. He stared hard at the eccentric handwriting; then he ripped open the crumpled envelope. It contained half a dollar wrapped within a page evidently torn from an old copy-book, on which, without date or signature, two words were scrawled.

"*Conscience Money*," he read, amazed.

He looked from the bit of paper to the money. He looked from the money to the bit of paper. Then he handed both to the detective.

The detective silently gazed at the letter. With his head set inquiringly askew he looked more like a fox than ever, — very sly, very wise, so very wise as to appreciate that there are a few things — exceedingly few — which even *he* could not explain.

For *this* could not be construed as an attempt to *extort* money!

The manager broke the silence with a laugh.

"I understand," he said. "This is the

boy who says that he got into the theatre without paying — and it seems that his conscience nabbed him!"

And he laughed again.

His face changed as once more he fixed his eyes on the simple scrawl.

"And afterward he was arrested! Poor little chap!" he ejaculated gravely. And again, "Poor little chap!"

With a sudden look of determination, or rather of impulse, for Gorham rarely acted from deliberate intention, he set his hat firmly on his head, threw the half-smoked cigar into the gutter, and without another word strode off abruptly down the street, leaving the detective staring blankly after him.

With the same swift, resolute step Gorham presently took his way to a great, many-storied building, and paused at the office of a broker whose name was emblazoned on the glass door.

Here he pushed through the outer room, where several clerks, office-boys, and typewriters, a telephone, and a stock indicator

seemed to be the presiding genii of the place. It was a very quiet day; there was an interval of stagnation in the market; and without ceremony he approached the inner door.

"Admission free?" he threw over his shoulder to a clerk, with an agreeable smile.

He hardly waited for the formal reply that Mr. Vanbigh was disengaged and would be pleased to see him. Gorham evidently had no doubts as to his welcome, for he opened the door of the inner room without so much as a tap on the panel.

Here he found at a desk a man still young, albeit his hair was whitened here and there and showed only a suggestion of its pristine auburn hue; his eyes were grave and had that steady, concentrated look characteristic of those who deal much with money in the abstract, as it were, as if they appreciated its elusive quality and fugitive tendency and kept a sharp lookout for unexpected vagaries. Nevertheless there was something in his aspect, even in the lines of his firm mouth, with its slightly compressed lips, that betokened

geniality, and the tones of his voice were kind.

"Jim, I want you to do me a favor," said the manager without preamble.

He disregarded the chair close at hand and perched himself on the edge of the desk.

"You could n't do me a greater favor than to ask one," said the broker, whose first thought was of course of the market, of bulls and bears, and he was prepared to do his utmost in the financial arena, for this was a friend whom he valued indeed. His well-controlled face changed as Gorham plunged into Ned's story; this was far from the sort of thing which he had expected, and taken by surprise he could not all at once adjust his mind to the point of view. He listened vaguely, perceiving no way in which this could concern any service that he could render Gorham, until at last the manager concluded with the blunt request, —

"Now Jim, I want you to go down and bail the little fellow."

The broker recoiled aghast. "*I?* Why,

the boy would jump the ranch! I should lose the money!"

The manager explained. "I'll stand in behind you. If the boy runs away and you have to pay the money I'll make it good. *I* can't go on the bail-bond, you see, because it would n't do for me to appear as one of the prosecutors in the case and surety on the bond as well! Even if *I* could get out of the case now against him, the other prosecutors would hold on to him."

Vanbigh said nothing. He looked at once surprised, distrustful, troubled.

Gorham talked on impulsively. "This is the first genuine case of conscience I have seen for many a year! Believe a boy who could n't endure to chouse me out of half a dollar burned my theatre! No, sir! I tell you I have lived so long by sham heroics and sham sentiment — and I am so sick of shams, and the world is generally such a big, shameless sham — that I'm mighty apt to know a genuine thing when I see it by the sheer force of contrast. *That* boy won't

jump the town! A boy with all that conscience to carry *could n't* run away! He is innocent. And this is a terrible charge. He is helpless and he ought to be befriended. I want you to give bail for him!"

The broker was not only dubious — he was becoming greatly embarrassed as well.

"Suppose," he suggested in a constrained voice, "it should be discovered somehow that I am not acting for myself in bailing him, but for *you*."

Gorham snapped his fingers. "I don't care! I don't intend to leave that little boy to languish in jail for months, for a year perhaps, till his trial comes off. I tell you the idea of doing this little good turn freshens me all over. I feel as if I had been on a big drunk and somehow got a gourd of cold water from a little spring under a hillside, where I used to stop to drink when I was a boy driving the cows from the pasture. I *have* been drunk, — on artificiality, and worldliness, and selfishness."

"But," remonstrated the broker. Then he paused.

"But what, man?" exclaimed Gorham impatiently.

The broker went red and was silent. Indeed, how could he find words to suggest seriously to a man of unblemished integrity that by this act of charity, as for mitigating circumstances men from sheer motives of humanity sometimes refuse to prosecute, he might compromise himself. He might be suspected of having connived at the burning of the theatre for the sake of the insurance money and then having secretly furnished bail for the captured accomplice for fear that the boy, if left in prison, would reveal and incriminate his principal.

"Oh, surely, surely, — no one could ever imagine such an absurdity!" thought Vanbigh, deeming this but a bit of over alert and captious caution.

Gorham was beginning to show unmistakable signs of anger, even offense. Yet he was only the more determined.

"Jim," he said in a different tone, "you and all your family have always protested yourselves under great obligations to me."

He paused as if for a reply.

"You know what we feel for you!" Vanbigh replied warmly. He lifted earnest eyes as he spoke.

For Gorham had been a schoolfellow of Vanbigh's elder brother, and although later in life they had drifted apart in point of association, there had always been that affectionate tie of old reminiscence between them. Only some two or three years earlier than the present they had chanced to meet in New Orleans, where they were lingering still at the time of the outbreak of one of the terrible pestilences of yellow fever. Gorham, when his friend succumbed, one of the first cases, nursed him like a brother, would not leave him, although he could then have escaped in the general panic-stricken exodus, never left him, indeed, for an instant, and after his death, being detained by the quarantine, contracted the infection and came very near death himself, alone and among strangers. People said that it was a mere impulse of Gorham's, — but the relatives of his friend

felt and expressed great gratitude. He himself had never before mentioned it.

"I know what you all *said*," he remarked significantly. "I never doubted it before." He would have paid "good money" to an actor who could command a tone of so subtle an inflection as to make such a hit as that!

The broker rose and put on his hat.

"I shall not let you doubt it again!" he protested.

"You are a good fellow, Jim!" cried Gorham, with great satisfaction in carrying his point.

"But it must be understood that I cannot undertake to act for you, under the circumstances; if the boy takes flight I lose the money myself," Vanbigh resumed.

He was thinking himself justified in this after all. He could have the boy kept under surveillance without his knowledge, and at the first suspicious intimation of flight his bondsmen could surrender him. Vanbigh felt that he could hardly refuse Gorham aught in reason, and believing the boy innocent of the

crime Gorham had evidently set his heart on bail for him. "But where am I to find another bondsman?" the broker exclaimed, realizing that these considerations would scarcely have weight with any other person. "The law, as you know, requires two sureties on the bond."

"Get Frank," suggested Gorham easily; for Frank was the broker's younger brother.

"Frank will kick like a mule!" Vanbigh said reflectively, rather wincing from the prospective fraternal conflict.

"Frank always kicks like a whole team!" commented Gorham. "But you can manage him."

The broker shook his head doubtfully. He appreciated, for indeed he had learned from experience, that a conflict with those of one's own household presents special and difficult belligerent elements. He was expectant of a controversy rather than disappointed by his brother Frank's attitude when, repairing to his residence for lunch, he broached the matter and requested the fraternal coöperation; for Frank promptly refused. Any

disinterested spectator would have thought Frank the more formidable figure in any encounter, domestic or otherwise. Frank was an amateur athlete, and as he sat in the comfortable library lighting his cigar after luncheon, the contour of his strong, shapely limbs under his light fawn-tinted spring suit, the pose of his blond head on his broad shoulders, the strength of his grip suggested in the mere manner of using his fingers, in casting away the match, all intimated a muscular reserve power none the less formidably apparent for being relaxed.

"I am beholden to you, Jim," he replied satirically. "Seem to think I am insane!"

The windows of the room looked out upon the wide woodland vistas of the driving-park just across the street. The heavy velvet carpet, the antique tall bookcases of time-darkened mahogany that lined the walls, even the spacious mirror above the marble mantelpiece, — all were obviously relics of the past. The contour of the old-fashioned square brick house, faced with gray stone, bespoke its condition

as overtaken by the march of municipal progress, rather than any choice of the fashionable site in the vicinity of the park. In fact it was the habit of the household to bewail the approach of the town, that in its swift strides and wealthy expansion had overhauled their quiet suburban home. But the approach of town had really worked them no harm, either material or sentimental. They were none the worse for the letter-box and lamp-post on the corner, and the splendid residences of the newcomers that made up the solid blocks of the vicinity had served to enormously enhance the value of the property. From the windows of the library and the drawing-rooms one might never know that the driving-park across the street was not still the "old woods" of years ago, save for the broad, smooth, well-kept roads winding deep among the vistas of the forest trees; and the sylvan tangles were no less picturesque now, because highly appreciated and carefully conserved by the taste of the park commissioners, than heretofore, when not considered at all.

Even the sound of the town was but a dull murmur as it came in at the open windows; one could not discriminate the bang of the cable car which had set Jim down at the corner. They were to all intents and purposes as far away from city life and city thoughts as if the woodland opposite, that cast so welcome and soft a green shadow through the lace curtains and gave so verdant and vernal a sylvan view, were really a wilderness instead of its graceful simulacrum.

"It's just as well, perhaps, that nobody told Gorham that *he* seemed insane when he fairly threw his life away, as he thought, rather than desert poor Phil, — who after all had no sort of claim on him," the broker replied, lighting his cigar also, but with quick, nervous gestures.

Frank was smoking hard. "Did you ask me to bail *Jasper Gorham?*" he demanded sarcastically, between two mighty puffs.

"I did *not*, indeed!" responded his brother, and then there was silence, save for a subdued clatter of dishes from the dining-room beyond

a cross hall, and the sound of some pleasant feminine voices on a side veranda, upon which it opened.

Frank was more apathetic than his brother, and better held in hand, but nevertheless the tone of this rejoinder struck home.

"You ask me," Frank began to justify himself, holding his cigar to one side and waving the smoke from his head with his other hand, —"you ask me to play stalking-horse for Gorham, to *pretend* to go on the bail-bond of this young criminal while Gorham is really his security."

"Frank," said the elder brother coolly, "I should really be warranted in throwing you out of the window."

"Lay hold!" said the athlete complacently.

Then there was silence for a time, and the two smoked quietly, now and again eying each other calmly, as if there had been no passage of arms between them.

The ladies were coming in from the veranda. Frank had a vague sensation of uneasiness. He was of that type of man who seeks to

exclude women from the discussion of business and who doubts the propriety of their holding property in their own right, even more than the policy of extending to them the suffrage. But the broker's coolness in the feminine presence implied the conviction that after all it would be men who would control whatever extension of privilege the future might hold for women. He was contemplating even now an intention of enlisting the interest of these as against the fraternal kicker. It was he, therefore, who renewed the subject immediately upon their entrance.

"You are mistaken, Frank," he said. "I gave Jasper Gorham to understand distinctly that in any event we would act on our own responsibility, and lose any money that may be lost, — if the boy should escape surveillance."

"What is it that Mr. Gorham wants?" demanded their mother, younger of aspect than one would expect from the presence of these stalwart sons. Her hair was abundant, though white, and waved heavily back from a strong, sweet, animated face with fine, well-set blue

eyes. She was clad still in a mourning dress in memory of the son who had perished in the pestilence, and her voice trembled on the syllables of the manager's name.

The younger lady paused, too, at the sound, and turned her head inquiringly. She wore a dainty house-gown, but even its tones were black and white. She had dark hair rolled *à la Pompadour*, and on her soft pink-and-white face was an incongruous expression of determination that glanced brightly, too, in her clear gray eyes. She had taken a baby of six months of age from a white-capped nurse, and was just consigning him to the arms of his uncle, for this was Jim's wife.

"Gorham wants to avoid imprisoning a boy — a mere child — who is somehow concerned in the fire and robbery — suspected of knowing something about the affair," explained the elder Vanbigh.

"Just like him!" cried both women, in a breath.

"Of course he will prosecute the little lad, if the evidence should warrant it, but he thinks

it the unlikeliest thing in the world that the boy is guilty at all, and until there is more developed against the child he hates to lock him up for months and months! It would do no good for Gorham to refuse to prosecute him, for the other prosecutors would hold on to him. So the little boy has gone to jail. Gorham is terribly wrought up about it."

"But can't you arrange it somehow, James?" his mother asked. "I should so like for you to be able to do something for Mr. Gorham." She sighed as she spoke.

No adequate requital of their obligations had been possible, of course. They had not been able to further Gorham's plans in any respect. He was a rich man, and reputed even richer than he was. He had no speculative tendency outside of the theatrical business. As for social prestige, he was not of their sort, and their circle not his. In truth, he had not cared often to meet these tearful, exacting women, who regarded him as a hero, and whose ideals so far exceeded his imagination and his ambition.

"Gorham asked *me* to go on the bail-bond," continued the broker, "although he said I should lose nothing if the boy absconds; but I would n't agree to that, and I asked Frank, for him, — but Frank would n't."

"Oh, *Frank!*" The poignant duet rose like a wail, and the athlete cowered behind his nephew's pink ribbon shoulder-knots and white frock as the child bounced and gurgled and squealed beguilingly at him.

"Do you think you are right to set them on me?" said the strong man weakly.

"Quit carousing with the baby and talk sense!" his brother adjured him.

"Oh, *Frank!* remember!" cried his mother in tears.

"Oh, *Frank*, money was nothing then! No friends, no help, every creature but Mr. Gorham fleeing from the plague-stricken!" cried Frank's sister-in-law.

"And how thoughtful for us — for *me!* — to remember and bring me my son's last words, his last messages!" The tears choked his mother's utterance.

"And then," said the younger woman, weeping in sympathy, — "to recall every incident, — the details of the treatment, — to make us feel that everything was done for poor Phil that we could have had done, had we been with him too! I don't see *how* we could bear to think of Phil, except that Mr. Gorham was with him to the last."

"And listened to his latest sigh and closed his eyes in death!" said his mother.

"And then he almost died too; he risked his life — to make sure that Phil had every chance for his own! Oh, — *Frank!*"

"Yes, yes, — he followed him to the gates of death and was only turned back by a miracle, it seemed — oh, *Frank!*"

"But it can't be a question of money with Frank," said his sister-in-law, wiping her eyes. "*Frank* would not stand on a question of mere money!"

"He thinks that we may be misconstrued," explained her husband. "And at first I was doubtful. But now it seems very plain. Gorham naturally does not want to keep this

child cooped up in jail so long. He 'll prosecute him fast enough if the boy seems to have really had anything to do with the crime or any guilty knowledge of it. But Gorham does n't believe this. He thinks the facts will come out the sooner if the boy is footloose and free. Of course he will be kept under surveillance all the time, and could hardly run away if he wished. We are in no sort of danger of losing the money, as far as that goes, and really *I* could not refuse Gorham, — he was so intent upon it!"

"Oh, — *Frank!*" cried his mother.

"Oh, — *Frank!*" cried his brother's wife.

"Where 's my hat?" said the athlete faintly. "Take the baby before I drop him! I 'm fairly knocked out! Let me go! Come, Jim!"

On the way down town Frank was again over the traces once or twice, but kicking was in vain, and he was going easily in harness, although fully realizing the awkwardness of the situation, when late in the afternoon they were admitted to the jail. As the door of the

cell opened, the jailer with grim humor said to Ned, "I 'm sorry to part with you, my boy, — the next time you come you must make us a longer visit!"

Ned turned his flushed, swollen, tear-stained face with a stare of blank amazement. He did not understand what the jailer meant, and he showed no recognition whatever of the newcomers.

The jailer suddenly noted the fact that the two gentlemen were evidently total strangers to Ned. He paused in his banter to look wonderingly from one to the other.

"I 've come to bail you, youngster," said the elder of the two, affecting a familiarity which he by no means felt. "Get your hat!"

Ned mechanically obeyed. He was afraid to ask an explanation, — to speak a word, — lest it be discovered in some way that the extraordinary good luck in this deliverance was all a mistake.

The jailer still stared, — more than ever after the great gate had opened and let them out on the street. The two gentlemen walked

on in advance, while Ned followed with an officer. The magistrate's office was but a little distance up the street on the opposite side, and there Ned, scarcely believing his eyes, watched the bold flourishes with which his two sureties signed his bail-bond, entering into an undertaking in the penal sum of one thousand dollars each for his appearance at the next term of the Criminal Court.

When these formalities were concluded he and his new friends came out together still in silence. He glanced instinctively over the way at the grim walls of the jail. There at the gate the jailer stood. He peered after them in the closing dusk as they walked silently away, — peered after them till the night seemed to swallow them up. "This beats all!" he ejaculated.

And still wondering he went back into his stronghold.

CHAPTER IX

It seemed to Ned that the best use he could make of his liberty was to pound Pete Bateman.

When, still silent, he parted from his silent bondsmen, he went without delay to his false friend's home. He took the alleyway, as he always did, being pretty sure of finding the boys at this hour in the back yard splitting kindling or bringing in the wash from the clothesline, or engaged in similar small domestic duties. In fact he heard the sound of chopping wood as he opened the gate.

The sound abruptly ceased when he thrust in his head.

It had grown quite dark. He could not guess whether the figure with the shapeless cap bending over the kindling were Pete or Tom, until after an astonished gaze at the in-

truder it skulked behind a wash-tub set high on a wooden bench.

That was Pete — every time!

Now and again the old cap peeped hastily out from behind the wash-tub and was as hastily withdrawn.

Ned still stood at the gate. He hardly knew what had become of his resolve. He tried to rally it by thinking of the fate in store for him when this interval of liberty should be at an end and the day set for his trial dawn.

Here was the lying witness at his mercy. He could thrash him, and thrash him well, — for fat Pete was no fighter. But somehow he felt that a boy who hid behind his mother's wash-tub ought to be allowed to stay there. Pete did not seem worth a good substantial licking.

As Ned stood undecided one of his mother's injunctions flashed through his memory.

"Ef ye can't git yer consent ter return good fur evil," she often said, "hold yer hands ennyhow from harmin' them ez have hurt ye."

All his troubles, first and last, had come from disregarding that simple, uncultured mother's simple precepts.

Ned shut the gate and walked away.

His account of the day's proceedings seemed a wild, terrible story to the panic-stricken woman who sat cowering in the little room that opened on the vistas of chimney-pots and clouds and stars. He found her in tears. She had just learned of his arrest through a message from the managing editor of the paper, who sent to say that he had arranged to have Ned's wages paid to her during the boy's imprisonment as regularly as if he were still at work. The editor had some charitable hobbies which thus liberally expressed themselves, aided in this instance by his confrères of the various departments of the paper. For although the editorial force deemed Ned the tool of the incendiaries and thieves, and thought that his obstinate silence was strangely incriminating, they still had faith enough in him to believe him the victim of a deception, and innocent of all intentional

wrongdoing; that he was somehow the dupe of an over-reaching craft, and the forlorn scapegoat of the real criminals. Even thus, the situation was discreditable to the last degree, and well calculated to alienate whatever friends the little lad had been able to make for himself. But when the "dude reporter," who had hied himself straightway to the office, detailed the strange disasters that had befallen the printer's devil, the editorial force remembered a thousand trifling benefactions received at his small, willing, ink-smirched hands, and a subscription, circulated among the desks, aggregated a sum sufficient to justify a promise of the continuance of the payment of his weekly wages for the indefinite time of his incarceration, till his trial should set the question of his guilt or innocence at rest.

Ned's presence at liberty once more could not reassure his mother. Long after he had gone to announce his release to his employers and resume his work she crouched pale and chill beside the monkey-stove, although the air was warm and languorous. Her mind was

filled with terror for the future and with those ever unavailing regrets for the past and the simple country home of her youth.

As Ned reached the newspaper building and looked up at the brilliantly illuminated windows flaring against the dark sky, he had a renewed sense of the blessedness of liberty and the privilege of labor, and once more the singular manner in which bail had come to him recurred to his mind.

His surprise, however, at the sensation which the story of his release produced in the sensation-seasoned composing-room soon effaced every other impression.

"Hold on a minute," said the foreman, interrupting the recital in its midst.

He stepped into the office of the managing editor, and presently that magnate came out, looking alert and inquisitive and catechistic, as a newspaper man will when there is a mystery in the air.

From some subtle instinct Ned knew that the foreman had made representations which the managing editor had pronounced preposterous, and had refused to believe.

"So you were bailed, were you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Ned.

The editor fitted the tips of his fingers together very accurately while he looked hard at Ned. He spoke slowly and impressively.

"Considering the very serious nature of the crimes with which you are charged and the amount fixed for bail, your sureties must repose a great deal of confidence in you. I hope that you will not abuse it."

"Naw, sir, I ain't got no notion o' runnin' away," declared Ned stoutly.

Both the editor and the foreman were looking at him very gravely.

"Who were your bondsmen?" asked the editor.

"Sir?" said Ned, bewildered by their manner.

"Who gave bail for you?" The editor varied the phrase.

"I dunno, sir," replied the little devil.

The foreman grinned triumphantly.

"*Don't know?*" echoed the editor amazed.

"Naw, sir," admitted Ned. "I disremem-

ber their names. I never seen either o' them till to-day."

Strange as he had thought the occurrence at first, it appeared still more strange now when he saw how others regarded it. They found it difficult, too, to believe that two men whom Ned had never before seen, whose very names he did not know, would each stake a thousand dollars upon his honesty when he was accused of house-breaking, larceny, and arson, and had just been committed to jail after his examining trial. The managing editor, who had known him long, had done all that was liberal, sympathetic, and sensible. That two strangers should be even asked to go upon his bail-bond seemed to Ned a wild impulsive vagary, — as indeed it was.

It did not seem so to the others. Business men do not account for the assumption of financial liabilities on the basis of an impulsive vagary. There was a very stern expression on the editor's face as he turned away. This journal had done much to unmask corruption in high places, and to uphold the standard of

public morals and private integrity. That it was not altogether too good for this world and a very human newspaper after all was manifest in its overweening and puffed up pride in its career of righteousness. It had waxed bold and censorious, — it was even esteemed insolent and trenching upon the reckless, — with its successes and its impunity, and it spoke out very openly without fear or favor.

Ned with a sinking heart began to experience a vague but troublous fear that further disasters were impending because of this. A little later he chanced to be passing through the local room. He was obliged to pause in his errand to the city editor, for that personage himself was blocking the aisle as he stood and conferred with a reporter at one of the tables.

The reporter, eager and over-zealous as a cub-reporter is apt to be, had sprung up as if to meet so good an assignment halfway, clutching his precious note-book to his bosom in his frenzy of haste and repeating his orders as if to fix them in his mind. "Yes, sir, —

go to the jail to-night, even if I can't get a peep at the bail-bond till to-morrow."

Ned did not understand, — why was he going to the jail?

The boy's face bore so pointed an inquiry that the city editor noticed it as he turned around and almost stumbled over the printer's devil with the message from the foreman of the composing-room. The city editor did not reply to the urgency for "local copee."

"Hey, boy," he said irritably, "always under foot!" Ned fancied that the editor would prefer that he should not have heard the reporter's assignment.

But this was no "scoop," the boy argued sagely. The detail of the examining trial would be in all the other papers in the morning. And a bail-bond could no more be hidden than a city that is set on a hill.

He fancied later that an effort was made in the editorial departments of the paper to allay his suspicions that aught unusual was perceived about the affair. Nothing more was asked of him, nor mentioned in his pre-

sence. The editors and the elder members of the reportorial staff maintained without apparent strain this check upon their personal and professional curiosity. But he could detect the "cub-reporters," the devil's natural enemies, looking at him sometimes with an eager greed to discuss the matter with him that could not he disguised. "Like a dog at a bone," thought Ned, in dismay. For he realized that the editors had serious purposes in this scheming silence. They evidently desired that he should not take alarm prematurely, and, reporting from the paper on his own account, instead of for it, convey warnings to others of the storm brewing there.

Their caution, however, did not extend to the composing-room. They regarded the printers as in some sort appurtenances of those precincts and with no functions nor interests beyond, — the mere tongue as it were of the paper, while the editorial force represented the subtler and essential powers of speech. It is needless to say that the compositors took no such inarticulate view of themselves. Ned

heard much in these days among the cases which he could not understand and which therefore made him wince. The printers never tired of asking questions about the unexpected bail, even when at work, thus infringing the rule of comparative silence usually preserved. They maintained, however, an affectation of the most careless and casual interest, pausing in the midst of an interrogatory, for instance, to slip the last stick off upon the galley, and not resuming till the type was locked to take the galley proof. They received his replies with sly winks at each other, significant leers, and similar demonstrations, until the boy, bewildered and angry, grew sullen and would not answer at all. He perceived in dismay that his silence added to their excitement and interest, and he began to believe that they too entertained strange suspicions about the affair of the bail-bond. He discovered that they made an effort to sound Peter Bateman and to find out from him if he knew anything of the mysterious reason which actuated Ned's sureties in going on his bail-bond and thus effect-

ing his release from jail, where otherwise he must have languished for many weary months.

Peter Bateman's domestic relations were such as to prevent him from being altogether secure or happy in the time intervening between Ned's committal and trial, even if he had not dreaded the ordeal of testifying again and in the criminal court. The Bateman family were under no illusions concerning him, although they did not dream that he had deliberately borne false witness against his former friend, but they thought his rectitude was of that nature and tenuity to be judiciously fortified, and many were the lectures unceasingly dinned into his unwilling ears on the evils of lying, and the hard fate of the liar both in this world and the next. Knowing as he did that he had already deeply involved himself, these were hard things to hear, and under the menace of the open word and the secret thought Pete fell away till his contour no longer resembled the Bologna sausage as of yore! He lay awake at night and he wept much behind the stove during the day. He

almost felt that if he had another chance he would actually tell the truth! Second chances, however, are rare in this world, and the inexorable law, in particular, holds out few opportunities for changing one's mind. His father and mother and grandfather were afraid to trust him out of their sight, not knowing what he might be at. Under the circumstances they could not say that he had done aught that was implicating, but they knew Pete of old and would hardly have been surprised at any development which would involve him and release Ned from the trouble. They berated Ned, notwithstanding, without limit, citing what he must have been to reach at last the fate at hand for him now. And so deceitful! they would exclaim in horror.

"Ned seemed lots more reliable than our Petey! At a pinch I'd ruther have trusted Ned in the cake-shop than Petey," Mrs. Bateman would declare.

"I would n't trust Pete there nohow, — without he wore a muzzle!" said Pete's

grandfather, who was the proprietor of a little bakery, and Pete was not so fat for nothing!

He had not the heart now to purloin so much as a macaroon. No murderer ever dreaded an encounter with the ghost of the defunct victim more quailingly than Pete feared meeting Ned. He lived too in absolute terror of the junior "typos" and galley-boys, who he fancied had entered into a conspiracy to decoy him out and thrash him by way of partisanship for Ned, for now and again Pete contemplated the unvarnished truth and was for the nonce oblivious of the fact that only his own guilty conscience and Ned were aware that he had sworn falsely and maliciously in the effort to compass the ruin of his friend. So often, however, did some fellow employee of Ned's come to the shop that it might well warrant Pete's conclusion. He had persuaded his grandfather to let him "tend shop" as a subterfuge to keep him indoors and protect him from the chance encounter he feared. He had made the most sacred promises in regard to devouring the stock,

for Pete's capacities in this line were formidable, and so far he had kept his pledge, for his appetite had vanished. "I 'd ruther ye had teeth like mine," his grandfather had said, showing an eight-dollar set in a grin, "for then ye could hypothecate 'em, and with that security in the safe I 'd feel more sure o' ye!" But Pete had begun to repent of his bargain, now that the curiosity of the composing-room had turned in his direction. He could sometimes have screamed with affright when the little bell on the door of the cake-shop tinkled as it opened, announcing an entrance, and, sent from the back room to wait on the customer, he would behold on the other side of the counter the round, rosy face and preternaturally sharp, alert eyes of one of the cub-printers. But for the counter between them Pete could not have stood his ground. The junior employees of the paper developed a taste for tarts that must have wrought stomachic havoc and financial wreck. In these crucial interviews the vacillating gourmand invariably found it difficult to determine exactly what it was that he wanted to eat.

"Cream-puffs, — have you heard anything more about the fire?"

"Naw! an' don't wanter!" replies Pete.

"Not *those*, — some with chocolate a-top. Who do *you* think set the theatre afire?"

"Dunno! Chocolate ain't never on cream-puffs, nohow."

"Well — what's *that* then? Do you think that Ned knows who burnt it?"

"I dunno nuthin' 'bout Ned! *Them?* just plain chocolate cake."

"Well — you swore to lots about Ned, considering you don't 'know nothing' about him. I wonder he does n't thrash you!"

"He dassent!" cries Pete tumultuously.

Whereupon the cub holds up his chin and looks critically over the counter at Pete, who sidles back and forth under this menacing gaze, and wonders if the cub can jump over the counter, and if anybody — grandpa, even "mommer" — is within call!

"Why don't you thrash Ned, then! They tell me he called you a liar in open court! And he is a small boy."

Pete begins to nod his head menacingly. "He 'll git somethin' worse 'n the lie when his trial comes off!"

"Where did he ever know the men who bailed him, anyhow?"

"In the theayter, mebbe, — they all burnt it together!" retorts Pete hardily.

"*Look-a-here!* you seem to know a *deal*, my hearty! More than is healthy!" declares the cub, with the affectation of a long, speculative look, which wilts Pete.

"Oh, take your cake an' go along!" exclaims Pete. "I ain't goin' to talk no mo'!"

"Just like Ned! He does n't talk any nowadays. For the same reason, I reckon. Might tell too much!"

"Oh, take your cake an' go!" screams Pete in desperation.

"Where is it? Oh, on the counter; well, — is *that* coffee cake or currant bun? One thing is certain — there will be a reporter at the trial!" the cub-printer adds with a menacing inflection, as one should say, "The judgment day is a-coming along!"

Under this stress Pete tries to rally, realizing that he is even now metaphorically face to face with the public. "Must I wrap up the coffee cake?" with a smile that would be an appropriate concomitant of a raging toothache.

"About as well as anything," and with a look indicative of the boxer latent in every man and a disposition to trounce Pete, which with difficulty he holds in leash, the cub-printer goes his way to his fellows of the composing-room and reports no progress.

Again and again scenes almost exactly similar to this took place, with only a change as to the identity of Pete's interlocutor, and as often he pleaded with his parents to be released from the duties he had been so anxious to assume in "tendin' shop." But they believed, and not without reason, that the street awaited Pete's idle time and there mischief lurked, and thus with his gnawing conscience and his miserable fears and his sadly jocose martyrdom he counted the days, and repented of the past, and dreaded the future,

and kept a lively and anxious lookout for Ned!

He was but secondary indeed in Ned's consideration. Ned did not even ask what transpired in the visits which he knew the galley-boys and printer-cubs made to the Bateman shop, when they returned, without news indeed, but munching their purchases from paper bags with the name of the elder Bateman printed thereon. Why should they go? What discovery could the elder printers anticipate in sending them on these bootless errands? The attitude of mind of the printers seemed to him the more formidable because he knew it was shared in the editorial rooms, where, however, all its manifestations were carefully cloaked from him. Yet he often noted indicia which convinced him that the suspicions of the editorial force were by no means allayed. He could not divine these suspicions nor whom they concerned. He grew more alarmed, and a conversation which chanced to come to his ears one day occasioned him much troubled meditation.

He was going into the "rinktum" of the editor-in-chief for copy. The door stood slightly ajar. He made no noise and for some moments his entrance was unnoticed. The crack reporter of the paper in a mysterious undertone was detailing something about the burned theatre to the editor-in-chief. There were present other editors of the various departments. Their faces all wore that excited, absorbed look which Ned had noticed whenever the name of Gorham was mentioned. One hasty scribe, in leaving off writing to come to listen, had thrust his pen behind his ear with an eager awkwardness that left a smear upward from the eyebrow and gave him an unwonted Mephistophelian aspect.

"Gorham says he is not going to rebuild his theatre," continued the reporter.

The ensuing silence had all the effect of an interrogation point.

"Says he is going to build stores only, strictly commercial purposes," pursued the interviewer.

There was a murmur of surprise, which could not, however, be construed as an interruption.

"He said he had concluded to go out of the theatrical business, — he had got sick of it; I asked why, and — and" — The young man broke into a laugh of mingled scorn and enjoyment. It was expressive, but clogged utterance.

"Why?" demanded the coterie in chorus.

"His mother was a Methodist," exclaimed the young sprig with another burst of hilarity.

A moment of dumb amazement.

"Has he just found that out?" asked the editor at last.

The writer who had smeared his face with ink accented its effect with a sneer. "Just found it out when he has gotten rid of a ruinous piece of property, converted into a splendid commercial building site, and with his pockets full of spot cash, his insurance."

"Ah, but his pockets are not full of cash," said the interviewer. "I was just coming to

that. The insurance companies have n't as yet ponied up. They have paid nothing. They seem 'rather slow,' he said. He supposes there must be 'a little hitch' somewhere, — it is a large sum with each company, — but he expects it presently. That is what he said. Upon my word I can't make him out. He told it all as innocently as a baby."

Ned could not make them out. He hardly felt that he understood the language in which they spoke, so little meaning did their words convey to him. He puzzled over this conversation often, but without result.

He encountered this spirit even at the foreman's house, where formerly he had loved to go. When he had first been employed at the office the foreman had chanced to send him to his dwelling for some forgotten article, and Bob Platt, who was a breezy, jovial soul and keenly relished a jest or quip with scant regard to its point or quality, if but it was merry, found much enjoyment in the account which he received of the country child's first encounter with a parrot, an honored member

of the Platt household. Thereafter he encouraged Ned's presence there that he might himself have a laugh at the boy's overpowering astonishment at the loquacious accomplishments of the bird and his simple-minded horror of its profanity.

"You see I ought to have sent it to Sunday-school when it was young!" Bob Platt seriously explained, and the new importation from the backwoods believed this at the time, as he would then have believed anything that Bob Platt chose to tell him, especially about that *lusus naturæ*, a bird that could talk and swear!

Later he came to know Bob Platt as "a mighty kind man, but will have his joke!" This just appraisement was brought about chiefly through Mrs. Platt's interference to prevent the devil from being "bedeviled" beyond the point of comfort and good-nature. She would not permit his mystification about city ways and his implicit reliance on the gay fables invented by Bob Platt, which Ned would have accepted as if they were gospel truth.

"Don't let him humbug you, Eddy!" she would interrupt warningly, at the very crisis of the fun.

For Bob Platt was by no means "boss" at home! His ascendency ceased at the threshold of the composing-room. Mrs. Platt gave Ned good, sound information and admonition to counteract the wondrous stories of the foreman, which the credulous boy was prepared to swallow whole coming from that source, so great was his confidence in Bob Platt, and to say truth his serious-minded wife spoiled many a good and harmless joke.

Mrs. Platt gradually became a genuine partisan of the lad. His kindly disposition was early appreciated by her. Indeed, only the day after he had first been sent there he had stopped on his way down town, for her neat home lay in a quiet cul-de-sac, with half a dozen other pretty cottages, opening off a genteel street between the dreary tenement region where he lived and the business portion of the city. After a neighborly country fashion he wanted to know if she had any

"yerrands" which he might do for her on his way back, "bein' as you ain't got no boys, an' nothin' but girls," he explained sympathetically and with an expression of genuine pity.

Despite her intolerance of jokes at his expense Mrs. Platt thought his commiseration very funny, but she had her own reasons to feel deeply the lad's simple effort at courtesy and proffer of kind offices. Her heart was the more tender in the knowledge that she had not long to live. A persistent bronchial affection, with which she had warred for years, which had kept them poor, devouring money and care and time like some veritable monster, had, still unappeased, developed into consumption, now so unmistakable that even Bob Platt's laugh was often petrified on his jovial face by the perception of the fierce and ghastly fate that stood awaiting his household in the near future. She accepted Ned's politeness in the spirit in which it had been offered, and sometimes made him proud and pleased in executing some trifling commission.

He came at last to be more genuinely useful, and often was intrusted with the escort of the four small girls of the family to the Sunday-school; and by this means Mrs. Platt got in some missionary work, for at that Sunday-school Ned heard of many comfortable things his spirit had not known before.

The four Platt girls had also some secular pleasures in which he participated, and the chief of these was called by them "viewin' the percession!" Never was there a muster of militia or a parade of firemen or a wonderful exhibition of bicyclists through the streets that they were not present to see. Whenever the exaction of the payment of some grotesque election bet set the community agog over the spectacle of one commercial magnate propelling another in a wheelbarrow through the principal thoroughfares, preceded by a band of music, and with all the teeth of the town a-grin in evidence of relish, the keenest cackle of callow laughter came from the four Platts and their attendant printer's devil. Never a circus tent was pitched and

the elephant made the tour of the town that Ned, with each hand held tight by the smaller girls while the two elder followed close behind within clutch of his protective jacket, did not hie himself with his charges to some coigne of vantage particularly adapted to joyously see all that there was to be seen. It was always Mrs. Platt who thanked the boy, but it was Bob who owed him special gratitude on these occasions, for but for this substitute he must needs have played squire of dames himself, for the Platt girls would take no denial, and their father had long ago lost a living interest in elephants.

Nowadays, however, Ned was aware that it was Bob Platt himself who took special note of him whenever he chanced to appear at the house, far more rarely though it was than heretofore; for the boy was both proud and sensitive, and he feared lest some allusion to his arrest and that terrible day behind the bars escape these friends of happier times.

"I want to set Ned to talking," Platt would urge when his wife would object to his interference with the lad.

"No! you get no 'scoops' here!" she would declare. For she believed that Bob Platt would not spare his grandmother had the ancient dame been capable of furnishing the paper with a genuine "scoop."

She had herself earnestly remonstrated with Ned and urged him to make a clean breast of the whole affair, and she believed faithfully that the boy had been terrorized into silence rather than was guilty of crime. When he resisted her arguments by simply maintaining a dumb persistence, she felt it was the part of wisdom to torment him no more. "Give him a chance to recover his spirits and his confidence in people! His whole life is at stake, and he shan't be scooped just for the paper!"

But she could not prevent the parrot from calling "Fi-ah! Fi-ah! Fi-ah!" as it often did, nor hinder Ned's guilty start at the sound. It would suddenly rouse him from his reverie, when he sat on the steps of the little side porch where the parrot's cage hung in a honeysuckle vine, and Bob Platt would mark the demonstration with an unconsciously knowing

look as he smoked his pipe beneath the flowering tendrils.

The parrot had no sinister intention in the matter. The call was only one of its mimetic accomplishments acquired by much repetition, for there was an engine-house only a block away, and the bird had been accustomed to this shrill alarm for years.

Often Ned had been to this engine-house when the men were at their drill, and he generally escorted the four Platt girls, who could not squeal loud enough nor shrill enough to express their admiration, — not of the splendidly efficient men, swinging down so quickly into place, all equipped and ready in one swift moment as it seemed, but of the horses and their preternatural wisdom in taking up their proper position of their own initiative, without a word of command, at the familiar signal. Of these horses, the favorite was "John Smith," an ancient warrior indeed, who had fought fire many a year before any of the Platt girls were born! Superannuated in fact he was, and had been sold to a dairyman.

He himself declined the transfer, and came back to the engine-house at every alarm in the district, scattering the cans from the wagon as he galloped till the streets seemed to be flowing with milk and honey. His loyalty carried the day and he was easily repurchased, the milkman declaring he must give up either the horse or the dairy. At each drill the Platt girls sued for permission to pat the triumphant animal, albeit he took no more notice of their little rosy paws than of so many apple-blossoms. This had always been an enjoyable occasion to Ned, who also admired deeply the veteran "John Smith;" but now he declined to go with the girls.

"I want to see an' hear no more about a fire while I live!" he declared doggedly.

"Fi-ah! Fi-ah! Fi-ah!" clamored Poll, catching at the word, fluttering her green and gold wings, and turning her head, with its crooked beak, downward while she held on to her perch with her hooking claws.

Ned winced anew at the sharp cry, and Bob Platt looked significantly at his wife. "*Try*

him ! " the look said openly. " *You* can get something out of him ! "

But it was needless for Ned to brace himself for resistance. Mrs. Platt would not interfere. Her kindness to him was not diminished even after she had been to see his mother for the first time and had experienced a cold reception. She had heard from Ned in the early days of her acquaintance with the boy that his mother held aloof from strangers, and she had approved of this trait in the simple country woman transplanted to a new sphere, and said that she thought the better of Mrs. Macdonald for it. Perhaps she did not expect this reserve in her turn, when she went to urge the brightest view, and counsel hope and cheerfulness, and adduce reasons to believe that all the disaster would be finally explained and smoothed away. She thought, however, that the attitude of Ned's mother was not unnatural, and that her experience was not calculated to foster much confidence in city people and city ways.

Despite Mrs. Platt's caution and resolve to

report, as it were, naught of the details of her visit, Bob Platt contrived to ascertain from his wife the fact that Ned's mother knew no more than they did of the whole strange affair, that Ned had kept his own counsel, and that she had evidently never before heard the names of the two men who had given bail for his appearance at the next term of the Criminal Court, and thus released him from jail.

All this served to increase the strength of the foreman's suspicions. Ned grew conscious of this accession of wonder and doubt that began to envelop him like a veritable atmosphere. So strong were these suspicions that they began to take on the quality of a grim certainty and definite menace. He was aware that they concerned others even more than himself, but who and how he could not for his life divine. He often went over in his mind the details of all the conversations he had heard; he recapitulated the impressions made upon him by gestures, significant glances, all the indicia of unexpressed sentiment, and strove to deduce the meaning of it all and its

effect on the future. But these speculations at last availed naught, and as the time for his trial approached the recollection was displaced by his anxiety on his own account, and the deep despondency which the sight of his mother's distress induced in him.

One evening — the long lingering summer twilight still lay upon the roofs and spires — he strolled into the composing-room. It was quite deserted, — a gas-jet here and there, burning dim and low, only accented the gloom. Through the open window he could hear the gay chorus of an opera *al fresco* in a neighboring beer-garden. In emulation, perhaps, a mocking-bird in a cage in a barber-shop below mounted his perch and filled the gas-lit atmosphere, redolent of bay rum and eau de cologne, with his soft ecstatic roundelay. Ned soon tired of looking out of the window. He had not read at all of late; he had been so absorbed by his troubles that he had not cared to keep posted with the times. As to self-education, of which he had once been so ambitious, he asked himself bitterly what was

the use of education to a boy who might spend years and years — the best years of his life — behind the bars.

This evening, however, the old craving came back to him in a measure. He stood irresolute for a moment. Then he turned to the case near by. He was not very expert in deciphering written characters. He often sought by practice to remedy this deficiency. He found generally ample exercise for this inability in the crabbed chirography of the editor-in-chief. Now as he turned up the gas he recognized the august scrawl of that magnate in the "copy" perched above the case.

The next instant his heart gave a great bound. His blood rushed to his head, beating tumultuously for a moment; then it receded, leaving him pale and dizzy, and feeling as if he were likely to faint.

For he saw written there the name of the manager-owner of the theatre, coupled with an odious accusation of burning the building, which no one could know so well as Ned was odiously false.

Ned now learned for the first time that the hot-headed Gorham had taken offense at some expressions in relation to the affair which the paper, surcharged with its grave suspicions, had inadvertently let fall. He had construed this as a reflection upon himself. Arrogant in his innocence, he had published a card — somewhat braggadocio in its tone, it must be confessed — in which he defied the editor to speak out his suspicions plainly, or be branded forever as a coward and a calumniator.

It was the editor's reply which Ned had chanced upon. The newspaper, through its many resources of procuring information, had learned that the insurance companies were on the point of formally refusing to make good the loss on the score of fraud; legal proceedings would doubtless be instituted on both sides. The time for the paper's "scoop" had arrived opportunely with the moment when it was necessary for the editor to answer the allegations against himself.

He had spoken, therefore, and spoken to the point. It had made a very disastrous show-

ing for the owner, although the editor avoided distinct averments. He permitted it to be seen that the manager had given cause for the strongest inferences against him, even to the extent that he had procured the destruction of his own theatre for the sake of securing the money for which it was insured. The point that struck Ned's attention chiefly was the declaration that the boy who had been accused of complicity in the crime and arrested had been bailed by parties who were total strangers to the prisoner and all his friends. When interviewed, one of these sureties, a well-known broker, had given the most casual answers, excusing himself by reason of a flurry in certain stocks in which his customers were largely interested, and which absorbed his attention. The other bondsman, a brother of the broker, admitted frankly and boldly that he had never seen the boy till he went on his bond, and "would n't know him now from a gate-post;" and although he and his brother had acted entirely on their own responsibility in the matter and would make good the bond should the

boy forfeit the bail, they undertook the liability solely to oblige Mr. Gorham, their close friend, who did not desire to keep so young a lad imprisoned so long a time, while there was still doubt of his guilt, and who had even offered to stand in behind them and pay the money himself should the boy give them the slip. Thus, the editor argued, Mr. Gorham played the double part of prosecutor and in effect bondsman for the prisoner.

Ned's hand shook. So it was to Manager Gorham he was indebted for his liberty. He could not for his life imagine why Gorham had come to his relief. But he was sharp enough to see, when it had been put before the mind in this plain way, that most outsiders would take the same view of it that the editor did; it was evidently the journal's opinion that the manager feared that the boy, if refused bail, would speak out and accuse him of himself burning or procuring the destruction of the building. The editor concluded, perhaps by way of vindicating his own courage and "taking the dare," by advising

the insurance companies to pay nothing till their investigations should have been pushed in this direction, and he recommended the owner of the theatre to the kind attention of the grand jury and the attorney for the State.

Ned, in an agony of remorse and anxiety, clung to the case, almost overpowered by the realization how evil a thing concealment is, and what ruin it had wrought here. The incendiaries, he reflected, had doubtless made their escape in this long interval. He and his fears and his groundless reasoning were responsible for that, — for more! — for the blasting of an honest man's character and the wreck of his fortune, for the insurance companies would pay naught! It seemed a grotesque libel on likelihood, but the manager might even be arrested, tried, and serve a long term in the penitentiary, charged with burning his own house to defraud the insurance companies, because of the wickedness of a gang of knaves and a foolish boy's folly.

Ned grew more and more alarmed as he

read again and again those strong logical statements that would forever blast the man who had befriended him at his utmost need, for the paper was a power in the land, and the editor's word weighed with all sorts of people. Ned might now have confessed all, — he thought of this once. The habit of concealment, however, does not give way readily. It yields only after the exhaustion of its uttermost resources. He asked himself who would now believe him? He was already accounted a mere tool and accomplice, and his puny efforts to whitewash such smirches as those intricate blots and tangles of loop-letters had put upon the manager's name would be ludicrously futile. He felt that he could measure the incredulity of the public.

He could measure, too, its credulity, alack, when all the town would read to-morrow the editor's reply!

The town never read it!

In a paroxysm of rage and fear Ned suddenly clutched the sheet and thrust it into the gas jet. The blaze leaped up. Distinct

shadows started forth from the murky glooms. The motion alarmed him. He glanced fearfully over his shoulder. He was still quaking at his own deed when the "copy" fell, a cinder. But perhaps his purpose was not yet served, he argued, for the article might have been set up. He looked at the imposing stone. The type was all ready, and in the chase, — the proof had been taken, — the revised smirched sheets lay hard by, all bearing the cabalistic sign O. K., the fiat of the press reader.

"They won't look at it again before the form is locked and goes to press," Ned said tremulously, for an audacious new idea had flashed into his mind. The article had compactly filled one third of a column. He swept the types of this space from the stone and replaced them at random in the boxes. Then selecting a larger variety, he began some of the fastest type-setting ever done in that composing-room. For copy he had gotten hold of a new prospectus of the paper, which was still in manuscript. Judiciously leaded he

thought it might fill the blank space, and this substitute for the article which he had done away with he judged was innocent enough. He worked on hard and desperately, — he did not know how long.

At length he was slipping the last "stick" off upon the galley; he hastily shunted the type from the galley to the stone in the space that the obnoxious editorial had occupied; he readjusted the "furniture" by a stroke of luck, as it were, and turning away to the window he perched himself upon the sill and gazed demurely at the moon as a step upon the stairs announced an approach.

CHAPTER X

The step on the stairs was an unsteady step. The foreman reeled into the room. Ned's eyes brightened. Would not Bob Platt's opportune spree seem the explanation of any difficulty that might arise on account of the lost copy, and also of any deficiency in the type-setting?

Still he hardly felt secure from detection until he saw the foreman with the quoins and the shooting-stick in his hand. Not so tipsy was Bob Platt that he was not now as always the deft and experienced handicraftsman. A blow from the mallet here and a blow there, — the locking was done; and Ned, feeling tipsy himself, dizzy with excitement, crept out and sat down on the dark staircase.

He wished no one to hear how he panted, for he could hardly breathe as he reflected on his daring deed. His eyes were hot; he

wanted no one to see the exultant gleam that was chasing the fright out of them.

Now and then he squirmed aside to escape a big foot that brought a burly shadow lumbering up the stairs, for the printers were coming in again; so presently were the latest dispatches and the last of the copy. The telephone bell continually jingled. There was once more the stir of haste and work and confusion in the composing-room, — the setting up of the final columns for the other forms. Ned listened occasionally, expecting to hear his name called. But Bob Platt did not need him. It seemed a long time that he sat there, gazing up through the narrow stair window at the stars, those fair and foreign worlds, glittering so high above the roofs, above the clouds, above the winds.

He heard now and then the agitated voice of the telegraph editor. Once a reporter came up the stairs in great bounds and with a momentum as if he had been flung from a catapult. Doubtless he thought he had a "scoop." "It 's a fake, I bet," thought Ned,

recovering his normal size, for he had shrunken to very small proportions to avoid that headlong rush. He had the best of reasons in his own experience to know how very thin some of these scoops were.

He realized how the hour was wearing on when he heard the rattle of the mailing wagons on the stones in the side street. It must be midnight.

Suddenly the thunder of the printing-press broke forth, clank, clank, clamor and clank; The air was vibrating with its regular, rhythmic throbs. The building palpitated with it as if it were alive. It was like the beating heart of a great full-pulsed civilization.

"They 're printing my work right now," cried Ned with all the pride of an author.

Then a twinge of anxiety seized him. He remembered his limited opportunities, and he had the grace to hope that there were not too many mistakes in the type-setting.

But such a sight has rarely been seen as that presented by the third column of the second page when the reeking sheets came

from the press. It was probably discovered by the more distant subscribers receiving the journal by mail before the paper, as personified by its employees, knew what had happened to itself.

The town, the immediate vicinity, also read it betimes. And certainly, although the enormity was caught in the second edition and hastily replaced with an article already in type on the tariff, the editor-in-chief was an object of pity the next morning, when opening complacently the folds of the journal, his eye fell on Ned's handiwork in the midst of the wit and wisdom of the important editorials. There, instead of the severe "reply" that should prove he was no merely malicious calumniator of innocence and integrity, was a typographical caricature of the prospectus of the paper.

Wildly leaded, with inverted u's and n's and p's and d's, incredibly "fat," it drunkenly and disconnectedly protested its devotion to the best interests of the public; "the People's Paper," it reiterated, with every inad-

vertent caper the printer's art is heir to. It bragged of its facilities, its presses, its talented writers, its supplements, and with orthographical vagaries to which the phonetic craze presents a soberly conventional aspect it pointed with pride to its career as a popular educator. Such "spells" as Ned had perpetrated! Lastly, with a crookedness that was very like a typographic leer, it begged to call attention to its handsome appearance.

Rude Boreas was but a piping reed to the way the staff roared with wrath. Ned arrived at the office in the midst of the storm. He had a confused sense of the general desolation; then the surroundings were canceled by the sight of the foreman's face, pale and agitated.

"What ails the boss?" he demanded of a junior compositor.

"The grand bounce!" responded that worthy.

Ned winced. This was an unexpected turn of affairs. He remembered the foreman's wife, who had fallen into a hopeless stage of

consumption, and their four small and helpless girls.

"He has been tight afore this, a-many a time," said Ned doggedly, trying to justify himself in his own mind for not having foreseen this possibility. Scheme as he might, things went worse and worse. "He has been drunk time and time again."

"Never like this," said the young typo, bursting with laughter. "My eye! When I first saw that column I thought I had the jim-jams myself."

In the investigations that were in progress the foreman admitted that he had been very drunk the previous night. Therefore he was at the mercy of anything that circumstantial evidence could prove upon him. The fact was elicited by reference to the proof that the article in question had been set up correctly. "And then," he confessed, "I came up here as drunk as a mink — a mule — after everything was in the chase, to lock the form, and like a tom-fool I must have set up this prospectus from the new copy, and I don't know

how I could have knocked the type into this crazy pi."

This seemed the only reasonable solution of the mystery, and it was accepted without demur or question. While Ned went about his ordinary work he listened anxiously to the sound of the editor's voice as he still bemoaned himself with his confrères in the "rinktum." Time had softened his sorrows only a very little. His tones were still pervaded by rage and grief, modulated but slightly by an appreciation of futility. It was like the subsiding anguish of a bull-dog when the burglar is gone!

Ned could but hope that the "bouncing" of the foreman would be reconsidered. This Bob Platt was a good fellow, and heretofore his weakness for strong drink had never interfered with his capable performance of duty. He had been in the office twenty years as man and boy; and now he was to be chucked out of it for an offense which he had never committed.

"He ought n't ter have been drunk," thought Ned.

And this was very true!

Bob Platt was a good printer, however; gilt-edged, Ned argued, taking courage, — and could no doubt easily find work elsewhere, with all his experience as foreman and capacity in management. Then Ned reflected that this story would be likely to create a ripple in typographic circles, and employers would be indisposed to engage a printer whose sprees expressed themselves in such fantastic publicity. Bob Platt might fail to get work. And there was the sick wife, and there were the small girls.

Ned once more began the profitable and pleasant occupation of hoping against hope. The staff would *never* part with Bob Platt. Ned hardly believed they could run the paper without him.

The printer's devil would not realize the mischief he had unintentionally done till he saw Bob Platt standing in the door of the composing-room, leaving behind him his friends, his twenty years of industry and capacity, and the trustworthy reputation they

had earned for him, all lost, as completely canceled as the editor's copy.

He was trying to carry it off jauntily. His hat was stuck on one side. He chewed hard on his quid of tobacco. He laughed as he nodded over his shoulder to the group of printers in the composing-room. "Be good to yourselves, boys! So long!"

Ned saw the haggard change in his face as he turned. He was going out empty-handed, with a dying wife and four small girls, to meet the cold, hard, tight-fisted, grinding world. Ned knew how cold, how hard, how tight-fisted, how grinding that world is!

"Say!" he screamed suddenly, throwing himself upon Bob Platt, "I done it! I done it! I done it, myself. If they hang me for it I can't hide it! I burnt the copy an' distributed the type of that editorial, an' fixed the purspectus in its place" — he remembered how awfully it looked — "as well as I could." The champion concluded with a sob.

Bob Platt stood for a moment staring, motionless.

"You Black-eyed Bamboozler of Beelzebub!" he exclaimed, with an unconscious alliterative habit contracted from the corrupting influence of headlines.

He might have been expected to fall on the self-accuser's neck for joy. He did nothing of the sort. He clutched Ned by the nape of that structure, and the doughty devil's feet hardly touched the floor once in the rapid transit to the "rinktum."

"Here 's this Imp of Iniquity," cried the foreman indignantly, "who says that he distributed the type and canceled the copy and set up that prospectus on purpose!"

"What on earth" — they mentioned a different region — "did you do it for?" rose the editorial chorus.

"'Cause," sobbed the champion censor of the press, "I did n't want that copee ter be printed. 'T warn't true!"

There was a short silence.

The conclave of editors stood aghast at the idea of printing truth only!

The managing editor was the first to recover

his faculties. "You are the boy who was arrested about this affair of Gorham's Theatre, I believe?" he said.

"Yes, sir," sobbed Ned. "An' Mr. Gorham never had no more to do with burnin' that theaytre than I had. 'T was ter *spite him* it was burned."

"Then you know who did burn it?"

The managing editor had fairly cornered Ned, but the obstinate boy refused to reply. For a time threats and persuasions were alike useless. Only by strongly representing to him that Gorham would be ruined unless the matter were cleared up was the truth sifted out little by little.

Mr. Gorham was finally summoned, and a full explanation ensued. He fairly foamed at the mouth with rage when with much difficulty he was at last made to understand the nature and extent of the suspicions harbored against him. He promptly identified the several malefactors from Ned's description of them, called in the police, and gave such details of their associates, habits, and habitat

that before nightfall one of them, the bandy-legged scamp, who had once been employed about the theatre as a supernumerary actor, was arrested and safely lodged in jail. He "squealed" very promptly and earnestly in the hope of being allowed the benefit of "State's evidence," and by his means the star's diamonds were traced through a variety of "fences" and recovered; his accomplice in this theft was also apprehended by the trail of the stolen costumes, and somewhat later the "first player" was captured and cast for a rôle with a long run behind the bars. Ned was much relieved when it was now made known that the company had lost nothing by the forcing of the safe in the theatre, for contrary to the usual habit the receipts were not left on that occasion in the office of the building and the criminals had gained practically nothing in bursting the lock.

Ned was amazed to see how the truth does prevail, how readily and implicitly his story was believed when it was given from the witness stand, and how promptly he was

acquitted. Gorham took advantage of every technicality and prosecuted the villains to the extremest limit of the law. They deserved all that they got, which was indeed good measure, but in his observation of Gorham in these days Ned became more and more aware that impulse is a poor substitute for principle as a basis of action, and that although impulse may serve as an excuse for much that is fierce or weak, it detracts from the merit of what is good. Gorham's kindly whim which restored him to liberty was no whit more kindly than the severe editor's lecture bidding him observe what great evils may grow from a cowardly concealment of the truth.

"It would have ruined us all but for the gilt-edged way the champion set that type," the managing editor presently observed aside, with a laugh, to his colleague. And with the recollection the editor-in-chief, whose copy was canceled by the devil, was at last able to laugh too.

For those strong and false accusations of Gorham, which would have laid the paper

liable for libel, were never published, and the insurance companies made good the loss by the fire in great haste and with many plausible and polite excuses for the previous delay.

Peter Bateman's perjury was committed in so important a case that it did not escape notice. On the trial he broke down and confessed, hoping to elude punishment on the strength of his penitence. In fact he was so limp, so tearful, so flabby, so fat, that he produced a youthful, irresponsible impression, and narrowly missing the State Prison, he was sent to the Reform School, where it is to be hoped he is learning that there is some policy as well as piety in keeping the ninth commandment.

Ned continues to work in the composing-room bossed by Bob Platt. For on the memorable day when the champion's exploit of type-setting was explained, the whole editorial corps turned to and besought the discharged foreman, unjustly accused and maltreated, to remain, and after much insistence he gracefully yielded.

But Bob Platt learned a lesson too, and has joined the Sons of Temperance.

Often now when the evening is lingering long on the spires and domes and mansard roofs, and the moon rises up from among them somewhere, as if she were a resident of the town rarely straying beyond the corporate limits, and the mocking-bird mounts his perch in the barber-shop below and sings his roundelay, — poor captive troubadour! — and the stars muster one by one, and the composing-room is dusky save for a dim gas jet here and there, and is filled with mellow shadows and mellow memories too, the foreman and the devil are wont to lean on the window-sill and look out and enjoy the interval of rest, and the touch of the breeze, and the faint, fading, roseate flush in the west, and laugh as they talk over again in much amity this exploit of the champion's type-setting.

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